



For Immediate Release

VETERAN ATTORNEY AND FORMER JUDGE ASSUMES REIGNS OF HARRIS COUNTY CRIMINAL COURT AT LAW NO. 2

Feb. 20, 2023 — Judge Paula Goodhart felt called to the bench.

A Houston attorney with nearly three decades of criminal law experience, Judge Goodhart was familiar with the judiciary, having previously served as a criminal misdemeanor court judge for nearly nine years.

Though she'd left in 2018, she knew there was still so much work to be done, so many lives she could impact.

"At the misdemeanor level, I had the opportunity to make a difference for people who maybe were in the criminal justice system because of poor decisions rather than real criminal intent," Judge Goodhart said, explaining why she'd decided to run again in 2022. "I just loved being a judge before and really felt like I had a calling to come back, if possible."

Judge Goodhart was elected to the bench of Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 2 in November 2022, replacing then-sitting Judge Ronnisha Bowman. With her four-year term beginning Jan. 1, 2023, she took the Oath of Office during a surprise swearing-in ceremony held just after midnight during an intimate New Year's Eve party she hosted for family and friends.

A Houston native, Judge Goodhart grew up on the south side of the city, attending Dobie High School in the Pasadena Independent School District. She went on to earn a B.A. in Sociology from the University of Texas at Austin and a J.D. from the University of Houston Law Center.

"I knew pretty early on I wanted to be a lawyer. When I went to UT, my goal was to go to law school," she said. "I studied sociology in undergrad. It allowed me to take a lot of criminal justice classes, like subcultures within prison systems, which always fascinated me."

Judge Goodhart began her legal career with the Harris County District Attorney's Office, starting as an intern during her second semester of law school and going on to work for the agency for almost 14 years. It was during this time, she said, that she first became interested in becoming a judge.

After leaving the District Attorney's Office, the judge transitioned into defense attorney work — a move she said she made because she knew it was important for a judge to be well rounded. Less than three years later, she was appointed by the Harris County Commissioner's Court to fill the vacant bench in Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 1, becoming the first woman to preside over the court.

Elected twice after her appointment, Judge Goodhart ultimately served in the post for almost nine years, from March 2010 through the end of 2018. During her tenure, she handled more than 34,000 cases and presided over more than 200 jury trials. She served as both presiding judge representing all 16 County Criminal Courts at Law, administrative judge representing all 20 County Criminal and Civil Courts at Law, and presided over one of the county's S.O.B.E.R. Courts.

Recently Elected Harris County Courts at Law Judges

- Criminal Court at Law No. 1 Judge Alex Salgado
- Criminal Court at Law No. 2 Judge Paula Goodhart
- Criminal Court at Law No. 3 Judge Leslie Johnson
- Criminal Court at Law No. 4 Judge Shannon Baldwin
- Criminal Court at Law No. 5 Judge David Fleischer
- Criminal Court at Law No. 6 Judge Kelley Andrews
- Criminal Court at Law No. 7 Judge Andrew Wright
- Criminal Court at Law No. 8 Judge Erika Ramirez
- Criminal Court at Law No. 9 Judge Toria Finch
- Criminal Court at Law No. 10 Judge Juanita Jackson
- Criminal Court at Law No. 11 Judge Sedrick Walker
- Criminal Court at Law No. 12 Judge Genesis Draper
- Criminal Court at Law No. 13 Judge Raul Rodriguez
- Criminal Court at Law No. 14 Judge Jessica Padilla
- Criminal Court at Law No. 15 Judge Tonya Jones
- Civil Court at Law No. 1 Judge Audrie Lawton-Evans
- Civil Court at Law No. 2 Judge Jim Kovach
- Civil Court at Law No. 3 Judge LaShawn Williams
- Civil Court at Law No. 4 Judge Manpreet Monica Singh

“Having been a judge before, I’m proudest of the lives I’ve impacted positively,” Judge Goodhart said. “I was the first S.O.B.E.R. Court judge for people under 30. I still have contact with some of those clients. It was really transformative.”

As she returns to the bench, she said she hopes to once again find a way to impact lives — both during her daily docket and outside of it. But her priority, she said, is addressing the court case backlog.

Court No. 2 currently has just over 1,774 active cases pending, 759 of which are considered backlogged. National standards call for misdemeanor cases to be disposed of within the first 180 days. Cases are considered backlogged when they’re still active in the system after that period.

“Justice delayed is justice denied — both for the accused and for any victims that may be impacted by the criminal justice system,” Judge Goodhart said, noting that she began reviewing cases and setting trials almost immediately upon taking office.

The judge said she also hopes to restore professionalism and accountability to the court, explaining that she felt zoom court had created a comfort level that didn’t always align with the gravity and dignity of the court process. A judge sets expectations for those who come to court, she said, explaining that there must be accountability and fair consequences for those who fail to meet those expectations.

“The most important part of my job is maintaining fairness, professional decorum, preserving the dignity of the process,” Judge Goodhart said. “People come to court sometimes at the lowest point of their lives. They need to know the powers that be and the system is taking their situation seriously and they’re going to be treated fairly and respectfully by all participants.”

Editor’s Note: This is the first in an occasional series featuring recently elected Harris County Court at Law Judges who are new to their Court.

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