

# WOMEN LEADERSHIP VIRTUAL EXCHANGE (WLVE) DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT

## Carla McMillian Wong: A Woman's Path into Georgia Judicial History

*Story by KSU student Isabelle M. Sambo.*

*Photos provided by interviewee.*

Carla Wong McMillian, as a college student attending Duke University, initially had plans to become a high school teacher following her graduation. Instead, she pursued degrees in both history and economics, a deviation from what her parents had wished for her: a degree to put her on the path of becoming a medical doctor. She knew her talents and aspirations in life were destined for other things. Before the start of her senior year at Duke University, McMillian sought the advice of her high school debate club coach, Dr. Bartlett. When asked by her mentor what her plans were following graduation, she expressed her desire to apply for graduate school and get a master's degree in education to become a teacher. Her debate coach, however, instead advised her to apply to law school, which McMillian had not considered previously. With this new encouragement, she applied to law school with the resolution of becoming a lawyer. McMillian graduated from the University of Georgia School of Law and became a lawyer under the Sutherland Asbill & Brennan law firm, where she would practice for 11 years.

While still working as a lawyer under the Sutherland law firm, a couple of judges resigned in Fayette county, where McMillian lives, due to lapses in their judgement. McMillian, a lawyer and an active member in her community, was worried about the judiciary of the county. She spent about a week soul-searching and thinking over whether she should apply for the position but decided that the position was not for her. McMillian was happy practicing at the Sutherland law

firm and applying for the judgeship meant she would have to run for re-election should she be appointed. McMillian had not wanted to leave a law practice where she enjoyed her partners and clients.



In October 2010, appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue, Carla Wong McMillian was sworn in as a State Court Judge of Fayette County.

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However, her mind gradually changed as she looked at her two young children and thought about what she would tell them about serving the community where they are growing up. McMillian especially considered her daughter and what she would teach her about not being afraid to take risks even if it meant venturing out of a safe position of comfort and to seize an opportunity when it presents itself, referring to her place at the Sutherland law firm. After talking it over with her husband, she applied for the judgeship position and was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to the State Court of Fayette County in October 2010.



Carla Wong McMillian with her family, friends, and supporters campaigning for her re-election into the Fayette State Court.

McMillian had a successful first term as a State Court judge for Fayette County. State court judges in Georgia have jurisdiction over one county and must run for re-election following a four-year term. If

uncontested, McMillian would simply return to her judgeship; however, she later found that she would be challenged for the position. McMillian spent the following year campaigning throughout her county with the support of her friends and family. When results of the election were released in July 2012, McMillian had readily won over her competitor; she would continue her judgeship in the State Court for another four years. When looking back at the campaigning process, McMillian states that she would not trade the year-long experience for anything.

Along with the support of family and friends, McMillian credits the community that assisted her family when they had first immigrated to Augusta in the early 1990s, a little-known fact is that Augusta has long-time ties with Chinese immigrants. She credits the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), an organization that provides a place for the Chinese population to host and celebrate Chinese culture with aiding her family's transition. Another organization is the First Baptist Church of Augusta, where the Church first reached out to Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s and is still prominent in the Chinese community of Augusta today.

McMillian especially places emphasis on supporting one another, like how the CCBA did for her family, reaching out to those of different backgrounds or culture, like the First Baptist Church did for her own family, and encourages people to aid those within your own sphere of influence.

Soon after winning her first re-election as State Court judge of Fayette County, a judgeship position in the Court of Appeals opened following the retirement of Judge Harris Adams. Several acquaintances casually asked McMillian if she intended to apply for the newly opened position, to which she said no. She considered that

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she had just won a hard-fought election for the State Court of Fayette County and intended to see through her second four-year term.

This changed when someone McMillian highly respected took the time to reach out to her and advised her to seriously think about applying to the Court of Appeals judgeship position. With this new encouragement behind her, McMillian applied for the position and was honored to be appointed to the Court of Appeals by Governor Nathan Deal in January 2013. Judges of the Court of Appeals hold their position for renewable 14-year terms, so McMillian was expected to stay on as a Court of Appeals judge for quite a long time. On March 1st, Chief Justice Robert Benham retired from the Supreme Court of Georgia, and Governor Brian Kemp appointed McMillian to the Supreme Court. Justice McMillian officially joined the Supreme Court of Georgia in April 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, her regular workday is seen from her home office where she drafts and reviews opinions and conferences via Zoom calls with her fellow Justices and staff.

Justice McMillian had never anticipated pursuing law or becoming a lawyer and even less so becoming a judge. Her story of success stems from her concern for her community and continues through opportunities continually presenting themselves to her. Justice McMillian's family had no ties to the justice system, she knew no lawyers aside from her friends' dads, and never went to court other than the time her mother was naturalized and officially became an American citizen. Justice McMillian's story is truly one of a quiet yet powerful role-model to women and the Asian community.



Isabelle Marie Sambo is an undergraduate student studying International Affairs at Kennesaw State University. Her goal following university is to learn as many languages as she can and travel the world. In her down time, she enjoys cooking cuisine from other countries and drawing.

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