



## 2023-2024 OFFICER NOMINEE BIOS

### **PRESIDENT: BERNITA HENLEY**

Bernita Henley started as a Judicial Assistant to the Honorable Charmiane G. Claxton, Magistrate Judge for the Western District of Tennessee – Western Division, in June 2009. Her current title is Chambers Paralegal.

Prior to employment with the Federal Judiciary, Bernita's legal career began in 1994 as a Legal Secretary for a sole practitioner. In 1996, she accepted a Legal Secretary position with the City of Memphis' City Attorney's Office where she served in this position for 5 years until she was promoted in 2001 to the Paralegal position. Another opportunity for growth presented itself in 2002 when she was offered a Paralegal position with the newly established in-house legal department for Memphis Area Transit Authority. In 2005, Bernita landed a position with Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare as a Workers' Compensation Paralegal for the Workers' Compensation Department wherein she stayed until being appointed to her current position.

Bernita received her B.P.S. in Paralegal Studies *Magna cum Laude* from the University of Memphis in 1999 and an A.A.S in Legal Assistant Technology *Magna cum Laude* from State Technology Institute of Memphis (now Southwest Tennessee Community College) in 1993. She was a member of Greater Memphis Paralegal Alliance (GMPA), Inc. from 2002 to 2007. She was also a member Mid-South Workers' Compensation Association (MSWCA) and served as Secretary for the 2007 and 2008 terms. She has served in the positions of Secretary from 2018-2019, Vice President/Membership Chair from 2019-2022 for FJAA and now, newly elected President-Elect.

Bernita has two adult daughters and 4 grandchildren (2 girls and 2 boys) which she affectionately refers to as her "4-Piece Spicy". She is a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. and when she is not handling SGRho's business, Bernita enjoys dancing, singing, traveling, cooking, and spending time with family and friends.

### **PRESIDENT-ELECT: YVETTE GARCIA**

Yvette Garcia is a Judicial Assistant with 17 years of experience currently working alongside newly appointed Magistrate Judge Michael A. Ambri. She holds a BA and MBA in management.

She previously served on the Federal Judicial Assistants Association (FJAA) Board as Secretary (from 2016-2018) and Treasurer (from 2018-2022). She was the co-chair of the 2022 FJAA Educational Conference which was held in Tucson, Arizona. Yvette is a powerful force in the workplace and uses her positive attitude and tireless energy to encourage others to work hard and succeed. She is enthusiastic, self-motivated, reliable, responsible, and hard working.

Yvette is inspired daily by her wife and their three adult daughters. In her free time, Yvette loves to run, cycle, hike, and travel.

## **VICE-PRESIDENT: JENNIFER HODGE**

Jennifer Hodge is the Judicial Assistant to the Honorable J. Daniel Breen in the Western District of Tennessee, Eastern Division in Jackson. She was selected to be his assistant in 2014, while he was serving as Chief Judge for the District. Judge Breen has since taken Senior Status and she continues to serve as his Judicial Assistant.

Jennifer has been employed with the Federal Court in Jackson, Tennessee since 2005, serving as an intake clerk, jury operations clerk and backup courtroom deputy. She graduated from Union University with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Organizational Leadership. Prior to her Federal Court experience, she spent approximately 15 years working in law firms, which began as part time employment throughout high school and college. Jennifer is married and has a son in college. She enjoys gardening, road trip adventures, antiques and spending time with family.

Jennifer has been the FJAA Sixth Circuit Representative since 2019. She was on the Annual Conference Committee for the Nashville, TN conference and has also been on the Nominations and Elections Committee and the Professional Development Committee. Since becoming a member in 2014, she has attended each of the yearly conferences which includes: Charleston, SC; Minneapolis, MN; San Francisco, CA; Grand Rapids, MI and Nashville, TN.

## **SECRETARY: GABRIELA MA**

Gabriela Ma is the Judicial Assistant to the Honorable James A. Soto, United States District Judge in the District of Arizona, Tucson Division. Gabriela became a judicial assistant when Judge Soto was appointed to the federal bench in 2014.

In 2011, Gabriela graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Arizona. After graduation, she returned to Nogales, Arizona—her hometown. She started working as a booking clerk for the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office. Before moving to the United States District Court, Gabriela worked in the Santa Cruz County Superior Court Administration Office as a secretary. It was there that she met Judge Soto, the presiding judge on the Superior Court bench in Santa Cruz County at the time.

In May 2022, Gabriela completed her paralegal certification. She currently enjoys crocheting, tending to her desert tortoise, and collecting eggs from her chickens. Gabriela received the honor of being the Secretary for the FJAA for 2022-23. She was instrumental in planning the 2022 FJAA Conference.

## **TREASURER: MELISSA HARDIN**

Melissa has been a judicial assistant since 1998, first with the state courts in Wisconsin, then joining the U.S. District Court for Western Wisconsin in 2002 as the administrative assistant to the Clerk of Court. After 10 months, she moved up to chambers as the judicial secretary for Judge John C. Shabaz until he retired. Since March of 2010, Melissa has been the judicial assistant for Judge William Conley. She has been a member of FJAA since 2003, spending four years as the Seventh Circuit Representative, two years as Vice President, before becoming President. Melissa is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point and has served on its Alumni Board of Directors since 2005. She also has a legal assisting degree from Columbus State Community College in Columbus, Ohio.

Melissa and her husband, Bob, love to travel the world. They have visited 6 out of the 7 continents and have 43 countries on their life list. Most recently, they traveled to Iceland in August of 2021 to see the lava flows from an active volcano and spent time hiking in Utah and Arizona. Other favorite places include Egypt, the Galapagos Islands, Machu Picchu, Venice & Rome, London, Angkor Wat, Japan, and the Great Ocean Road in Australia.