

2022 Polk County Judge Group 8 Candidate Questionnaire Responses

Candidates responded to five questions in writing between June 14-23, 2022

What are the MOST important factors that drive your decision-making?

John Flynn (see page 2 for responses to the other four questions)

From a legal perspective I must rely on the rule of Law and the Constitution. I believe the Constitution should be respected and never legislated from the bench. I believe in the American judicial system and want to always serve our community with that in mind. I will make rulings based on the evidence that is put before me in accordance with the rules of evidence and the laws of the State of Florida. I have spent the last two decades protecting and defending the Constitution, which is the foundation of our legal system.

Ruth Knight (see page 3 for responses to the other four questions)

I understand the responsibility I will carry as a judge and that the decisions made shall produce equitable outcomes. My place as a judge will be to apply the law as it is and not to change or make new ones. I have the courage to do what the law requires as long as I am upholding the law. My practice experience gives me a well-rounded approach to making judicial decisions; decisions that will be based on the rules of law while setting aside personal beliefs. I will strive to serve the public with compassion while looking out for public safety.

Carmalita Lall (see page 4 for responses to the other four questions)

The most important factors that drive my decision making is to first assess the issue, analyze and interpret the ambiguity to create clarity. I often ask myself the question, "Am I adhering to the rule of law?" I am an advocate for justice, fairness, and integrity. These factors, along with being mindful of particular social situations and the cultural differences drive my decision making.

Adam Patton (see page 5 for responses to the other four questions)

In a judicial capacity my decisions are driven by the law and the constitution. A judge should be required to consistently follow the laws as they are written, as such I believe that should be the primary factor in a judge's decision making. On a personal level, my decision making is based on my faith in God. I believe in striving to make the best choices possible and to humbly accept responsibility for a poor decision, and work to make a better choice on the next one. I strive to make decisions with integrity, to do the right thing, even when no one is looking.

Tara Wheat (see page 6 for responses to the other four questions)

The most important factors that drive my decision making are my principles, preparation, and education. The principles of integrity, honesty, empathy, justice and fairness guide me daily in my personal and professional life. These are values I was taught from the time I was a young child, by my family, my church, and my teachers, and these are values that I am instilling into my own children. I think it is very important to always be prepared. In my personal life, this may be in the context of planning my route to an event ahead of time so that I arrive early, or researching my children's schools before enrolling them. In my professional life, it means I always walk into the courtroom having thoroughly researched what statutes or case law apply to my case, having considered the other side's evidence and point of view, and having all of my arguments ready. As a judge, it means that no matter whether I am placed in criminal court, civil court, small claims court, etc., I will ensure I am well-prepared to handle all matters before me. I highly value education and believe there is always more to learn. Continuing education goes hand-in-hand with being prepared. The way I stay prepared and what helps drive my decision-making process is my education. As an attorney (and as a judge), I must stay current on changes in the law, whether legislative or through higher court decisions. It is important to me to continually read and research so that I know I am following the law faithfully.

John Flynn

What is your background, family situation, and community involvement?

I grew up in Georgia with a wonderful family that I am proud of. They taught me faith in God and the importance of education. My father was a wonderful man, who has passed away, but happily, my mother now lives here in Florida, and I try to see her often. I have older siblings, who have families and live all over the country, so we get together as often as possible.

I attended the University of Tampa on a Leadership Scholarship. After graduation from the University of Tampa I attended Nova Southeastern. In 2002 after attending Loyola University for my Juris Doctorate degree, I moved to Polk County after accepting a position with the Office of the State Attorney and have been a Polk County resident since. I started my career as a prosecutor, then opened my own practice, serving as a trial attorney.

I am the father to a beautiful 7-year girl, whom I love to spend time with. We stay active with school activities, karate, and gymnastics.

Over the past 20 years, I have served our legal community in many ways. Namely, as Chair of the 10th Judicial Circuit Grievance Committee. I also served as a former Chair of the Unauthorized Practice of Law Committee, and I am a member of both the National Criminal Defense Lawyers Association and the Polk County Trial Lawyers Association. I have served as a voluntary mediator, a victim advocate, and was a member of the Lakeland Bar Association and a former member of the Wilson Inns of Court.

In my private practice, I have helped countless people's stories be told. As a defense attorney, I have learned more than once, that at times, people truly can just be at the wrong place at the wrong time, and they need a voice in our judicial system as well. My firm has organized many charity events, participated in countless fundraisers, and have done my best to serve the community when the opportunity arises. I am a member of the Elks Lodge and the American Legion.

Why should people support you and your campaign for this position over the other candidates?

Experience. I have been in this community for 20 years. I have handled jury trials in high-profile, high-stakes cases. I am experienced on both sides of the courtroom. I have been the assigned prosecutor for the City of Lakeland's courthouse and as a Felony Prosecutor in Bartow. I have represented individuals accused of a crime and fought to protect their constitutional rights. I understand the law and how the unique dynamics of each case differ. I will remain committed to the rule of law. I will invest the time necessary to give each case the attention it deserves, and I possess the even temperament required to maintain an orderly and efficient courtroom.

What podcasts or media do you listen to or follow regularly?

At this busy time in my life, I don't find much time for regular podcasts or media outlets. I enjoy a good movie, reading, and golf mostly. I stay remarkably busy with my daughter's activities and try to soak up as much family time as possible.

What is your website or social media where people can get more information about you and this position?

Website: www.johnbflynn4judge.com

Facebook: [facebook.com/JohnFlynnForJudge](https://www.facebook.com/JohnFlynnForJudge)

Instagram: [instagram.com/johnflynnforjudge/](https://www.instagram.com/johnflynnforjudge/)

Ruth Knight

What is your background, family situation, and community involvement?

I am the older of two daughters. My family fled communist Cuba in 1985 and came to the United States in search of religious freedom and better opportunities. We lived in Chicago for two years and later relocated to Puerto Rico while my father served in Haiti as a volunteer missionary. In 1989 I started undergraduate studies at the University of Puerto Rico Cayey University College and in 1993 received a bachelor's degree in Psychology and Mental Health of the Community. Soon after graduating, I returned to the United States. In 1997 I started law school and in 1999 I earned my Juris Doctor Degree from the University of Florida Levin College of Law.

In 2004 I married Terrence Mizell, a bailiff with the Polk County Sheriff Office. God has blessed us with two boys who are now teenagers. We are active members of the evangelical church Soldiers of the Cross and serve our community through church ministries.

Why should people support you and your campaign for this position over the other candidates?

With 22 years of experience in the legal field, I have the necessary experience, temperament and skills to be elected as County Judge. I am committed to serving the community with humility, integrity, fairness, courtesy, and patience. I have spent all of my legal career as a public servant. Right after graduating from law school I started working for Florida Rural Legal Services in Lakeland. For over 2 years, I represented low income individuals in cases that mainly included landlord tenant, housing issues, public benefits and small claims. In 2002, I joined the Public Defender Office and since then, I have been engaged in active courtroom practice that ensures knowledge of the law and courtroom procedures. I have been handling cases that range from simple criminal traffic infractions to first degree murders. Throughout the years as an Assistant Public Defender, I have been given the opportunity to hold positions of increasing responsibilities such as supervising other attorneys while serving as Misdemeanor Division Chief, and Division Chief in several felony divisions. I have also worked in the juvenile division representing at-risk children charged with committing delinquent acts.

What podcasts or media do you listen to or follow regularly?

To keep informed of what is happening in our community I watch local area news channels.

What is your website or social media where people can get more information about you and this position?

<https://www.ruthknightforjudge.com/>

Carmalita Lall

What is your background, family situation, and community involvement?

I worked at the Public Defender's Office, 10th Judicial Circuit for almost 7 years prior to entering the private sector. My experience encompasses both criminal and civil litigation. I earned my MPA (Master's in Public Administration-Honors) in 2018 while working as a single mother. I am a proud mom of two teenagers. My eldest is a recent grad. I have recently served on the board of the Polk Association Women Lawyers and volunteered as a guardian ad litem, representing the needs of children.

Why should people support you and your campaign for this position over the other candidates?

I overcame many challenges through dedication, hard work, and a determination to succeed. These are qualities that a judge should possess along with perseverance. I will rule with integrity, fairness and uphold the law. The many years I spent serving the Polk county citizens as a public servant has provided the necessary expertise and experience in the courtroom. I also possess the "soft skills" that is paramount for a judge in managing the courtroom and its people and every litigant should leave the courtroom with the perception that justice was served in a fair and impartial manner even if they are not the winning party. My master's in public administration has trained me to devise and implement policies, manage diverse people and programs. These skills are important for a judge to obtain since they require planning, implementing, leading, managing, and evaluating.

What podcasts or media do you listen to or follow regularly?

I rarely have the time to listen to podcasts, I listen to the local news often to be aware of community issues and events. I read books to enhance my knowledge.

What is your website or social media where people can get more information about you and this position?

<https://carmalitaforjudge.com/>

Adam Patton

What is your background, family situation, and community involvement?

I am the third of seven children, the son of a teacher and a college professor, and maintain a good relationship with my parents and siblings. My first job was as a paper boy at 13, and I consistently worked a variety of different jobs throughout my teens. I played varsity football and Recreational slow pitch softball and basketball during my high school years. I worked full time while earning my undergraduate degree from Boise State University. I worked in sales and management positions with some major corporations before attending law school. I went to Law School at Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville. I earned my degree while working as allowed and raising three children. I have been married to my wife for over twenty years and have five wonderful children who have all attended or currently attend Polk County Schools. I am actively involved with my church, and previously have been involved with the Boy Scouts both as a leader and as a merit badge counselor. I have worked in conjunction with numerous organizations to lead hurricane response teams throughout the State typically working chainsaw groups to help remove and clear fallen trees and other debris. I actively support Youth Sports and have coached youth soccer and baseball. I have sponsored scholarships for Polk County Students to help them pursue their degrees. I have also sponsored underprivileged student athletes allowing them to participate even when the student could not afford the equipment or fees. I have spoken on numerous occasions to students, from Elementary school to High Schools and how the legal system works, and also how mathematics is used in the legal system. I currently sit on a committee for the Central Florida Aerospace Consortium.

Why should people support you and your campaign for this position over the other candidates?

I am very well rounded and have a large variety of experience. I am a former prosecutor under Jerry Hill, and have also worked on the defense side. I have handled thousands of criminal cases. In addition, I have practiced a wide variety of Civil cases on both sides, including nearly every type of civil case that would be seen in county court, including Small Claims matters, higher valued county court cases, Circuit Civil cases that in 2023 will be seen in County court and even family law cases, which a county judge can handle in our Pro Se Division. I have handled hundreds of different Civil cases and have had over 100 non jury trials in civil matters. In addition to being an experienced litigator in a large variety of areas, I am certified by the Florida Supreme Court as a County Court, Circuit Civil and Circuit Family mediator. I have mediated a variety of cases in these three areas throughout the State. As such I am trained and experienced as a neutral. I believe in Thomas Jefferson's quote, "Equal rights for all special privileges for none." I firmly believe that the best way to fairly and equally treat every individual that comes before the court is to read the law as it is written and consistently apply the law to the facts and circumstances before me. The role of a County Judge is one that frequently does not involve only one area of law, and I feel that a candidate for the position should have experience in as many of the areas that they might be responsible to decide cases in. Learning it for the first time on the job as a judge is not fair to the citizens of Polk County.

What podcasts or media do you listen to or follow regularly?

The only podcast I follow at all or listen to regularly is my younger brother's NCAA football podcast. I do listen to some TedTalks on youtube, but most of the media I follow is locally based and I usually read the online versions.

What is your website or social media where people can get more information about you and this position?

<https://VotePattonForJudge.com>

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram profiles: Adam Patton for Polk County Judge Group 8

Tara Wheat

What is your background, family situation, and community involvement?

I am a fourth generation Polk County native and lifelong resident of this community. My great-grandparents moved to Lake Wales in the early 1900s and both my grandmother, Chrystelle (Capps) Allen, and my mother, Theresa (Allen) Draper, grew up in Lake Wales. I was born and raised in Lake Wales and Lakeland and I currently reside in Winter Haven with my husband and children.

I graduated from Lake Wales High School in 2001 and attended Florida Southern College on a full merit scholarship. I graduated in 2004, cum laude, with a Bachelor's of Science in Business Administration. I taught English education at Lake Wales High School from 2004-2007. My husband and I married in February of 2006, and I became a step-mother to Kalle, 4, and Branden, 7. After the birth of my daughter, Chacea, in 2007, I began law school at Stetson University College of Law in 2008, on a full merit scholarship.

I attended Stetson in their part-time program, at night, driving an hour and a half each way. I began teaching English again, in 2009 at Bartow High School, while attending law school. I moved to the Academy of Legal Studies at George Jenkins High School in 2010, teaching English and legal classes. My son, Holden, was born in April 2012 and I graduated from Stetson in May 2012, passing the Bar Exam later that summer. I was admitted to the Florida Bar in January of 2013, and I took over as Director of the Academy of Legal Studies in 2014, teaching all legal classes. During summers, I did pro bono work, often with Elizabeth Stewart, P.A. in family law.

In June 2016, I left education for the 10th Circuit Public Defender's Office. I have been an assistant public defender for 6 years and I currently practice in the juvenile division, representing children who have been charged with offenses in delinquency court. I am a past member of the American Bar Association and Lakeland Bar Association. I am a current member of Phi Delta Phi, the Polk chapter of the Florida Association of Women Lawyers, the League of Women Voters, the Polk County Trial Lawyers' Association, the Academy of Legal Studies' Advisory Board, Willson Inn of Court, and Junior Service League of Bartow as a board member.

Why should people support you and your campaign for this position over the other candidates?

I am the only candidate who is a lifelong resident of this community, with roots that go back four generations. I am devoted to my community and have always sought to live my life in service to others. I have been a steadfast advocate for children, first as a teacher, and now through my work as an assistant public defender. I care deeply about safeguarding Constitutional rights and the rights of individuals. It is important to me that everyone in the justice system do their part to uphold our Constitution. As a judge, I will be committed to faithfully and impartially applying the established law in a fair and balanced manner, with reason and principle, and without bias. I also believe I have the right temperament for the bench. I will be respectful and considerate of all litigants before me. I want the citizens and their attorneys who appear before me to feel that I have truly listened and deliberated before reaching a decision, and that the legal reasoning for the decision is clearly expressed and is in accordance with the Constitution, the laws of the United States, and the laws of Florida.

What podcasts or media do you listen to or follow regularly?

There are no particular podcasts or media that I follow regularly. I listened to *Serial* back in 2014 when it was popular, but after that, I was never interested in another podcast. I do not have regular cable or television, so I typically do not watch any of the major news channels. I consume most news in written form, but there are none I particularly subscribe to regularly. I will generally receive any major news from the Associated Press, the New York Times, the Washington Post or USA Today. I receive my local news from The Ledger or the Daily Ridge.

What is your website or social media where people can get more information about you and this position?

www.tarawheatforjudge.com, or by following Tara Wheat for Judge on Facebook or Instagram.