



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse
900 Georgia Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402

**A TRAILBLAZER IN WOMEN’S HISTORY,
JUDGE MARTHA CRAIG “CISSY” DAUGHTREY**

March 2023

As we look back over our history, we see the tremendous strides women have made in the legal profession since the start of the twentieth century. More than half of the graduates of law schools are now women. Four women are associate justices of the United States Supreme Court. Women make up approximately 33 percent of federal judges and 30 percent of state judges. And women are represented on all of the states’ supreme courts.

We want to highlight the life and achievements of one remarkable woman in this space as we celebrate Women’s History Month. That woman is Martha Craig “Cissy” Daughtrey. She has blazed a trail of firsts through the legal profession in the state of Tennessee.

Daughtrey was born in Covington, Kentucky, in 1942. She lost her father at a very young age. As an English major in Vanderbilt University’s class of 1964, she became the first female president pro tempore of the student senate. She then entered Vanderbilt Law School as one of only three women in her starting class and the only woman in her first-semester section. At that time, she had never even seen a female lawyer. She excelled academically, graduating eighth in the class of 1968. She achieved this honor despite taking time off from law school to care for her newborn daughter at a time when having a child would often spell the end of a woman’s professional career.

As she neared the end of law school, she faced a significant obstacle: none of the law firms in Nashville would interview a woman for an attorney position, let alone hire her. However, Daughtrey had won the support of a number of male Vanderbilt alumni. She thus secured a position as the first female Assistant United States Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee in Nashville. She then moved from federal to state criminal prosecution, becoming the first female prosecutor in the District Attorney’s Office in Davidson County, Tennessee.

In 1972, Daughtrey continued her string of firsts by becoming Vanderbilt’s first female tenure-track law professor. In addition to teaching criminal procedure and evidence, she developed a course on Women and the Law. By that time, there were fifty female students at the law school. She not only taught but also mentored those students, helping them start the Women Law Students

Association. Daughtrey indeed has been known throughout her career for mentoring younger lawyers, both women and men.

In looking back on her career of legal firsts upon receiving the 1998 President's Award of Excellence from the National Association of Women Lawyers in 1998, Daughtrey reflected on "how hard it is to establish yourself as a serious professional when the level of acceptance by your colleagues reduces you to ridicule or, at best, bemused toleration." Martha Craig Daughtrey, "Finally, We Had Each Other in Significant Numbers," *Women Lawyers Journal* 84 no. 1 (Spring 1998): 14. It was important, she observed, not just to open a door as the first woman through, but to make sure she "held the door open long enough to prevent it from slamming in someone else's face." *Id.*

The year 1975 marked the beginning of Daughtrey's many years of judicial service. As with her entry into law school, she became a judge without ever having seen a female judge. In 1975, she was appointed to the Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals, becoming the first woman to sit on a Tennessee court of record. In 1990, Governor Ned McWherter appointed her as the first woman associate justice on the Tennessee Supreme Court. She won a statewide election for the seat later that year. In 1993, President Bill Clinton appointed her to the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. She was the first woman from Tennessee to sit on that court and the third woman on the court as a whole. It was the first professional position she held where she was not the first or only woman. Judge Daughtrey assumed senior status in January 2009 and continues to serve as a senior judge today.

The many other honors Judge Daughtrey has received in recognition of her historic career include the inaugural Athena Leadership Award in 1990, awarded by Nashville community leaders to a person who has achieved the highest level of professional excellence, contributes time and energy to improve the quality of life for others in the community, and actively assists others—particularly women—in realizing their full leadership potential. Judge Daughtrey's trailblazing achievements and support of others make her a model we should all seek to follow.

Curtis L. Collier
United States District Judge
Chair, Eastern District of Tennessee Civics and Outreach Committee

Carrie Brown Stefaniak
Law Clerk to the Honorable Curtis L. Collier
Past President, Chattanooga Chapter of the Federal Bar Association

Karen L. Sheng
Law Clerk to the Honorable Curtis L. Collier