

**BEFORE THE STATE COMMISSION
ON JUDICIAL CONDUCT**

CJC No. 23-0921

PUBLIC ADMONITION

**HONORABLE LAURINE BLAKE
336TH DISTRICT COURT
BONHAM, FANNIN COUNTY, TEXAS**

During its meeting on December 3-4, 2024, the State Commission on Judicial Conduct concluded a review of the allegations in this matter against the Honorable Laurine Blake, judge of the 336th District Court in Bonham, Fannin County, Texas. Judge Blake was advised by letter of the Commission's concerns and provided a written response.

After considering the evidence before it, the Commission enters the following Findings and Conclusion:

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. At all relevant times, the Honorable Laurine Blake served as judge of the 336th District Court in Bonham, Fannin County, Texas.
2. Judge Blake is retiring as the 336th District Court Judge on December 31, 2024. As a result, Kyle Shaw ("Shaw") and Christina Tillett ("Tillett") ran as judicial candidates in the Republican primary election for the 336th District Court.
3. In February 2023, Tillett expressed her interest to Judge Blake about being elected as the judge for the 336th District Court, while Shaw expressed interest in May or early June 2023. In private conversations with Tillett, Judge Blake informed and invited Tillett to several meetings, including the Criminal Justice Committee, Fannin County Bail Bond Board, CPS Quarterly, Fannin County Behavioral Leadership Team, Bonham Kiwanis Club, Bonham Rotary Club, Getting Ahead Program, and Fannin County Republican Women.

4. At some of the meetings Tillett attended, she was introduced as a judicial candidate for the 336th District Court, and members of the organization endorsed her while Judge Blake was present.
5. Judge Blake informed Tillett about the Getting Ahead Program and invited Tillett to assist in serving the meal that was provided. After Tillett assisted Judge Blake with serving the meals, they took a photo together, which was posted on the Getting Ahead Program's Facebook.
6. Before the primary election, Judge Blake sent a text message with the statement, "Did you know this?" accompanied by five screenshots to her friends with whom she has "close political affiliations and/or working relationships." These friends included Melanie Grammar, Fannin County Party Chairwoman; Richard Glaser, Fannin County Criminal District Attorney; Joe Ward, former Fannin County Republican Party Chair; Tom Turner, the former owner of the Fannin County Leader newspaper and a community leader; Judge Newt Cunningham, Fannin County Judge; and Randy Moore, former Fannin County Judge.
7. The screenshots contained a search on the Collin County website for judicial records relating to Shaw. The screenshots contained cases that Shaw worked on as an attorney, his personal divorce cases, and a legal malpractice claim. However, the screenshots also contained cases unrelated to Shaw, including criminal cases involving "Kyle Shaw" or "Kyle Lynn Shaw," who was born in 1983, a divorce case between Michelle Shaw and Kyle Shaw, a paternity case naming Kyle T. Shaw, and the Suit Affecting the Parent-Child Relationship involving Triston James Shaw and Zaporah Annemarie Shaw.
8. In her written responses to the Commission, Judge Blake stated that she believes it was clear from the screenshots that nine of the cases were specific to Shaw, twenty-two cases did not involve Shaw, and five cases that did not specify "Kyle K. Shaw" or "Kyle L. Shaw". Judge Blake believes there is "no evidence [she] was intentionally or recklessly misrepresenting information to attribute it incorrectly to Shaw."
9. Judge Blake further stated that it was never her "intention that [her] politically sophisticated friends should believe 'Kyle L Shaw' or cases entitled 'The State of Texas v. ...' were in fact Shaw's cases." However, Judge Blake admits that the information could potentially influence her friends regarding who they support or vote for.
10. Melaine Grammer ("Grammar") responded to the text message and screenshots Judge Blake sent, inquiring about what Judge Blake was trying to point out in her messages. In the text messages to Grammar, Judge Blake made the following statements regarding Shaw:
 - And of course his 3 or 4 divorces.
 - One of his prior wives is raising his daughter (the 16-year-old in Frisco).
 - His son unfortunately killed himself 6 years ago. Not sure what age he was but I'm of the impression he was a teenager. I'm assuming this might be the one over which he had gained custody?
 - Just pointing out all his litigation because I figured you don't want to be the last one who learns this. You have been protective of the reputation of the party. Perhaps he revealed all this is there is no surprise.

- Christina [Tillett] hasn't overstated her qualifications; I think Walt is telling people 'She's not qualified.' One person already discussed this with Christina. Walt's a problem.
 - Given the number of lawsuits Kyle has, he'll identify with the litigants...not sure that's a good thing.
 - Do you know if he now has 2 children outside of his marriage? (3 total). It's gotta be hard on the women in relationships with him. But he is a likable guy.
 - I don't think Christina [Tillett] is motivated to be negative."
11. In her written responses, Judge Blake admitted that "three divorces, four civil lawsuits in Collin County, and a civil lawsuit in Fannin County are more detrimental to Shaw than they are helpful in a political campaign." Judge Blake believes voters prefer a candidate to be married once and have no history of personal litigation. However, Judge Blake does not believe Shaw's divorces and civil lawsuits were a "death knell" to Shaw, but it could provide insight into his values.
 12. Judge Blake added that she believes "[s]tability in the judge's family life is like a ballast in a ship and helps maintain the judge's ability to have an even keel when resolving disputes day in and day out for 20 years. And being the only District Judge in a rural community, the judge does not have the luxury of anonymity of [her] counterparts who serve in large, urban districts."
 13. Judge Blake also noted in her responses that "Shaw may not have desired that Grammar be aware he had been married 4 times and divorced 3 times, or that he had the civil litigation in which he acknowledged he was involved. But those were matters of public concern and related directly to his qualifications as a judicial candidate."
 14. Tillett won the Republican Primary election in March 2024 with 3,234 votes (53.48%), while Shaw received 2,813 votes (46.52%).
 15. Judge Blake denies letting her relationship with Tillett influence her judicial conduct or judgment, as she believes her relationship with Tillett was professional and not personal. Also, Judge Blake denies lending the prestige of her judicial office to advance the private interest of Tillett because she believes candidacy is not a private interest but a matter of public interest and concern.
 16. Judge Blake further believes she was patient, dignified, and courteous towards Shaw, as the text messages were not made in her official capacity as a judge.
 17. Judge Blake also denies knowingly or recklessly misrepresenting Shaw's identity, qualification, present position, or other facts as she "never indicated all the records were in fact the Shaw seeking office in Fannin County."
 18. Finally, Judge Blake adamantly denies authorizing her name to endorse Tillett for Judge and does not believe any of her actions or conduct towards Shaw constitutes willful conduct that casts public discredit upon the judiciary or the administration of the judiciary.

RELEVANT STANDARDS AND AUTHORITIES


1. Canon 2B of the Texas Code of Judicial Conduct provides, in relevant part: “A judge shall not allow any relationship to influence judicial conduct or judgment. A judge shall not lend the prestige of judicial office to advance the private interests of the judge or others; ...”
2. Canon 3B(4) of the Texas Code of Judicial Conduct provides, in relevant part: “A judge shall be patient, dignified, and courteous to...lawyers and others with whom the judge deals in an official capacity...”
3. Canon 5(1)(ii) of the Texas Code of Judicial Conduct provides: “A judge or judicial candidate shall not knowingly or recklessly misrepresent the identity, qualifications, present position, or other fact concerning the candidate or an opponent.”
4. Canon 5(2) of the Texas Code of Judicial Conduct provides, in relevant part: “A judge or judicial candidate shall not authorize the public use of his or her name endorsing another candidate for any public office, except that either may indicate support for a political party.”
5. Article V, Section 1-a(6)A of the Texas Constitution provides, in relevant part, a judge shall not engage in “willful or persistent conduct that is clearly inconsistent with the proper performance of his duties or casts public discredit upon the judiciary or administration of justice.”

CONCLUSION

Based upon the record before it and the factual findings recited above, the Texas State Commission on Judicial Conduct has determined that the Honorable Laurine Blake, the judge of the 336th District Court in Bonham, Fannin County, Texas, should be publicly admonished for: (1) allowing her relationship with Tillett and/or Shaw to influence her judicial conduct or judgment when she sent negative text messages regarding Shaw to inform and influence members in the community regarding Shaw; (2) lending the prestige of her judicial office to advance the private interest of Tillett to win the primary race election for 336th District Court Judge when she: (a) sent negative text messages about Shaw; (b) informed and invited Tillett to community meetings, where she was endorsed by members of the community; and (c) invited Tillett to serve a meal with her for the Getting Ahead Program; (3) failing to be patient, dignified, and courteous towards Shaw when she sent negative text messages about Shaw to influence members of the community; (4) knowingly or recklessly misrepresented Shaw’s identity, qualifications, present position, or other fact(s) when she sent screenshots attributing cases to Shaw which were no related to him; (5) authorizing her name to endorse Tillett for Judge of the 336th District Court when she: (a) invited her to attend community meetings with her; (b) allowed Tillett to be endorsed at the community meetings she invited her to; and (c) took a photo with Tillett that was published on the Getting Ahead Program’s Facebook page. Judge Blake’s failures in these respects constituted willful and persistent conduct that is clearly inconsistent with the proper performance of her duties and cast public discredit upon the judiciary or the administration of justice, in violation of Canons 2B, 3B(4), 5(1)(ii), and 5(2) of the Texas Code of Judicial Conduct and Article V, Section 1-a(6)A of the Texas Constitution.

The Commission has taken this action pursuant to the authority conferred it in Article V, Section 1-a(8) of the Texas Constitution in a continuing effort to promote confidence in and high standards for the judiciary.

Issued this the 7 day of February, 2025.



Gary L. Steel
Chairman, State Commission on Judicial Conduct