

# **KING COUNTY DEMOCRATS - Judge Sharonda Amamilo for Supreme Court**

## **Q1. Background**

I have dedicated my career to the law and to public service. I currently serve as a twice-elected Thurston County Superior Court judge—the first person of color to hold that position—and have served as a Judge Pro Tempore on the Washington Court of Appeals, Division II. That experience involved full record review in a complex state agency appeal and participation in panel deliberations requiring rigorous analysis and independent contribution.

Before taking the bench, I spent twelve years at the Thurston County Office of Public Defense, rising into management leadership and representing adults and children in criminal, juvenile, and dependency matters. My work included representing parents and foster youth in dependency proceedings, where courts were often asked to distinguish between poverty-related hardship and legal neglect.

I also served over 25 years in U.S. Army military intelligence, retiring as a Chief Warrant Officer and Certified Intelligence Oversight Officer—producing written analysis under demanding, time-critical conditions where accuracy and clarity were essential.

I have called Washington home since 1992, when I was stationed here from Germany. I earned my B.S. in Adult Education from Southern Illinois University, my M.B.A. from Saint Martin's College, and my J.D. from Seattle University School of Law.

Before my legal career, I worked in fast food, as an office clerk at a nuclear facility, and as a union member with the Professional Technical Employees Association and AFT Local 4184, where I chaired the Grievance Committee. I also worked in the Black Lung division at the Department of Labor.

I currently serve on the Washington State Sentencing Guidelines Commission, the DCYF Oversight Board, and statewide efforts addressing jail standards and alternatives to incarceration.

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## **Q2. Proudest accomplishment**

My proudest accomplishment is the life I have built in service—to my family, my country, and my community.

I have been married for 28 years, and together we raised seven children who are now healthy, independent adults, and we are now blessed with six grandchildren. At the same time, I served over 25 years in the United States Army and built a career in public service and the law.

Balancing those responsibilities required discipline, sacrifice, and a deep sense of purpose. It also shaped how I see people and the decisions I make on the bench. I understand that behind every case are real families and real lives, and that perspective has stayed with me throughout my career.

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### **Q3. Injustices perceived, within or outside the courtroom**

In twelve years of public defense, I saw how the burdens of the legal system can fall unevenly—particularly on people without resources and families navigating poverty and trauma. I represented clients who remained in custody because they could not afford bail, while others with greater resources were released pretrial. In dependency cases, I saw situations where the underlying issue was economic instability rather than willful neglect, yet the consequences for families were profound.

I also saw the importance of respecting tribal sovereignty in cases involving Native families. The Indian Child Welfare Act and the Washington Indian Child Welfare Act reflect a recognition that the removal of Native children has historically disrupted not only families, but entire tribal communities. In dependency, termination of parental rights, and juvenile matters, those laws require courts to apply heightened standards and to engage with tribes as sovereign governments. When those principles are not fully understood or applied, the consequences can extend beyond the individual case to the erosion of tribal rights and cultural continuity.

Those experiences continue to inform my work on the bench. In my courtroom, I focus on making clear findings on the record and ensuring each party has a meaningful opportunity to be heard before decisions are made.

I have also participated in statewide work related to sentencing policy, alternatives to incarceration, and family well-being. Addressing injustice requires both careful decision-making in individual cases and a willingness to improve the systems that shape them.

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### **Q4. Restoring faith in the integrity of the justice system**

Faith in the justice system is earned through consistency—courts that apply the law evenhandedly, explain their reasoning clearly, and treat every person with dignity and respect.

In practice, that means issuing decisions grounded in the record, articulating the legal basis for rulings, and applying the same standards regardless of who is before the court. My experience has shown that people are more likely to accept outcomes when they understand how the decision was reached.

Access also matters. When court processes are understandable and navigable, public trust increases.

Finally, representation matters. As the first person of color elected to the Thurston County Superior Court bench, I have seen how a judiciary that reflects the community can strengthen confidence in the system. Trust is built through consistent, principled decision-making over time.

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#### **Q5. Hate crimes—balancing free speech against malicious harassment statutes**

This question reflects a well-established tension in First Amendment law: distinguishing between protected expression and conduct subject to criminal sanction.

The First Amendment protects a wide range of speech, including offensive speech, but it does not protect true threats, intimidation, or other unprotected conduct. Washington's malicious harassment statute focuses on conduct motivated by bias, and courts must apply it in a way that respects both constitutional protections and individual safety.

That requires careful attention to the facts—the words used, the context, and their effect. Courts must distinguish between offensive expression and conduct that places a person in reasonable fear of harm.

My approach is to apply the governing law faithfully, analyze the record carefully, and ensure that both constitutional rights and personal safety are fully considered.

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#### **Q6. Novel legal issues and emerging technologies**

New technologies are increasingly shaping both the evidence that comes before courts and the processes courts themselves use, including the introduction of artificial intelligence into legal analysis and court operations. These developments present questions that existing legal frameworks were not always designed to address, making disciplined judicial reasoning especially important.

My approach begins with understanding the record—what the technology does and how it was used in the case. I have encountered cases involving complex financial and digital evidence that required careful review of technical materials before applying the law. The same principle applies to emerging technologies: courts must first understand the function and limits of the tools at issue.

At the same time, the use of algorithmic and AI-driven processes raises important concerns about reliability, transparency, and the potential for bias. Courts must be attentive to whether such tools introduce unintended or disparate impacts, particularly where they affect liberty, family integrity, or access to justice. That requires careful scrutiny of how those systems are developed, applied, and challenged within the legal process.

From there, courts apply established legal principles to new contexts. The framework is not absent, but the analysis must be more careful and more exacting.

Appellate courts also have a responsibility to write clearly in these cases so that trial courts receive meaningful guidance and the law develops consistently.

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### **Q7. Gender Justice Study—addressing gender inequities in the criminal justice system**

The 2021 The Gender Justice Study reflects concerns long observed in practice: that gender can affect how individuals are treated throughout the justice system.

Addressing those inequities begins with disciplined decision-making. Judges must be attentive to how bias—whether conscious or not—can influence credibility determinations, sentencing, and case outcomes.

My perspective on this issue is informed not only by my professional experience, but also by the lens through which I have experienced the legal system—as an African American woman, raised in the rural South, and shaped by decades of military service. Those experiences, together with my work representing women, parents, and children in criminal, juvenile, and dependency proceedings, have reinforced the importance of careful, individualized analysis rather than reliance on assumptions.

At the institutional level, ongoing education and data-informed review are important tools for identifying disparities and improving practices. At the appellate level, clear and well-reasoned opinions can provide guidance that promotes consistency and fairness across courts.

This is ongoing work requiring attention at every level of the system and a continued commitment to equal justice at the Supreme Court.