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Justice Beasley Ready To Defend Her Chief Justice Seat In 2020

By Cash Michaels
Contributing writer
CashWorks Media

When Associate NC Supreme Court Justice Cheri Beasley officially takes over as chief Justice on March 1st, she will remain in that role until 2020.

But make no mistake – she’s already vowed to run for election to maintain that seat, and given Beasley’s record of winning judicial elections, it’s a vow that any possible and probable opponents would be wise to take seriously.

“Let me be clear... I will indeed be seeking election in 2020, and I’m excited and I’m ready to go,” she declared during a telephone interview last week, two days after Gov. Cooper made history by appointing her the first African-American female chief justice of the state’s highest court, succeeding the outgoing Chief Justice Mark Martin, a Republican.

The court’s remaining Republican, Associate Justice Paul Newby, was not pleased with the governor’s choice, saying that it should have been him because he has the longest tenure of service.

“[Gov. Cooper]... decided to place raw partisan politics over a non-partisan judiciary...,” Newby, who is expected to challenge Beasley, a Democrat, for the seat in 2020, said in an angry statement.

“I am very comfortable with who I am as a person,” Justice Beasley said in an indirect response. “I am comfortable with the fact that the governor has placed his confidence in me and that I’m equipped to do this job.”

And exactly what does a chief justice of the NC Supreme Court do? The chief justice is the head of the third branch of state government. Besides leading the court, she will determine the schedule for the cases to be argued, and other administrative matters before the court. There is also an executive director who assists with those day-to-day responsibilities.

Becoming chief justice is not something Justice Beasley even considered when she began serving on District Court in Cumberland County twenty years ago. And there weren’t any black female chief justices in other states to emulate until Georgia Chief Justice Leah Sears in 2005.

“I thought it was just such an honor to have been selected, and then elected to serve,” she recalls, noting when then Gov. Jim Hunt appointed her in 1999, after five years in the Public Defenders Office. Once elected to the District Court, Beasley spent a total of ten years on that bench.

After a few years on the NC Court of Appeals, then Gov. Beverly Perdue tapped Judge Beasley to serve out the remaining term of NC Supreme Court Justice Patricia Timmons-Goodson in December 2012, becoming only the second black female jurist ever on the NC High Court. Two years later, Justice Beasley won election to that seat.

“Justice can be served in so many ways, and the more you see it, the more you want to see it, because you know how talented we are, and those talented ought to be recognized,” Justice Beasley says.

On the 200th anniversary of the NC Supreme Court, this is an historic year. There are three African-Americans on North Carolina’s highest bench – more than ever in our history, more than other state in the nation.

That happened last November when civil rights attorney Anita Earls was elected during the mid-terms. Justice Beasley says her new colleague, who joins Justice Mike Morgan and she, has proven to be a welcomes edition.

“Even in a very short period of time, she is a valuable member of the court,” Beasley says. “Her insight and professional experiences have brought a really profound perspective to the court. Justice Earls had no prior judicial experience, but that does not limit her abilities or her keen sense of analysis of the issues before the court. So she is a joy to work with, a welcomed addition to the court...”

Justice Beasley continued, “The fact that this is Black History Month, it’s powerful, it’s really powerful that we have such a diverse bench, and that we’re in a place in North Carolina where literally all of us have been selected by the people to serve, and I think that says a whole lot about where we are, and where we want to be.”

Judge strikes down North Carolina voter ID OK’d by voters

By Gary D. Robertson

RALEIGH (AP) - A North Carolina judge on Feb. 23 voided new state mandates requiring photo identification to vote and also limiting income tax rates. He ruled the GOP-controlled legislature lacked authority to put those constitutional amendments on the ballot because lawmakers had been elected from racially-biased districts two years earlier.

Wake County Superior Court Judge Bryan Collins sided with the state NAACP, which had argued that General Assembly was “illegally constituted” because federal judges had declared the district maps used in the 2016 legislative elections illegal racial gerrymanders.

The civil rights group had challenged four amendments, but only two of those- the voter ID and the income tax cap - were approved by majorities of voters in November.

“An illegally constituted General Assembly does not represent the people of North Carolina and is therefore not empowered to pass legislation that would amend the state’s constitution,” Collins wrote in his order cancelling the two amendments and the laws that put them on the ballot.

The NAACP lauded the decision. While nearly 30 legislative districts had been struck down by federal courts, the legislature ultimately redrew lines for two-thirds of the General Assembly’s 170 districts. Democrats and their allies were particularly incensed over the voter ID requirement, calling it an unnecessary obstacle for people to vote.

“We are delighted that the acts of the previous majority, which came to power through the use of racially discriminatory maps, have been checked,” state NAACP president Rev. T. Anthony Spearman said in a news release.

But Republican legislative leaders, flabbergasted by the decision, vowed to appeal quickly and seek to delay the judge’s decision. In earlier legal arguments last summer, lawyers for the GOP leaders sued by the NAACP said the edition of the General Assembly that put the amendments on the ballot was a lawful governing body. They also pointed out then that federal judges allowed the 2016 elections to proceed under the maps at issue.

By Collins’ logic, Senate leader Phil Berger’s office said in a statement, all laws approved from June 2017, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the old maps, to last December could be voided, too.

“One man with a political axe to grind invalidated millions of votes and potentially dozens of laws, including the state budget,” Sen. Ralph Hise, a Mitchell County Republican, said in referring to Collins, a registered Democrat.

Legislators passed a law in December implementing the voter ID amendment that would require people to use one of several photo identification cards when they vote in person. But it also included many exceptions. Still, critics say the law would disproportionately harm minority citizens and the poor. GOP

leaders, who contend photo ID builds public confidence in elections, decided to try to add the voter ID mandate to the constitution after federal judges struck down a wide-ranging election law that included the requirement and scaled back early in-person voting.

Collins wrote the “unconstitutional racial gerrymander tainted” the three-fifth majorities in each chamber necessary to submit the amendments to voters. He said that amounted to “breaking the requisite chain of popular sovereignty between North Carolina citizens and their representatives.”

The other amendment struck down lowered the cap on state income tax rates from 10 percent to 7 percent. GOP supporters portrayed the proposal as a way to keep recent GOP laws cutting tax rates in place after they left office.

The case could ultimate reach the state Supreme Court. The seven-member body is composed of at least five registered Democrats. Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, who opposed all six amendments ultimately put on the November ballot, soon must fill a vacancy on the court.

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JUSTICE CHERI BEASLEY



“BLACK PANTHER”

‘Black Panther’ makes Oscar history twice for diversity

By Jonathan Landrum Jr.

LOS ANGELES (AP) - “Black Panther” went back-to-back into the Oscar history books on Feb. 24, Sunday evening.

Ruth E. Carter and Hannah Beachler became the first African-Americans to win in their respective categories. Carter was first up as she took home an Academy Award for costume design, then Beachler followed her with a win in production design at the 91st annual Academy Awards at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles.

“I dreamed and prayed for this night,” said Carter, who was the lead costume designer behind the Afro-futuristic wardrobes in Ryan Coogler’s “Black Panther.” She was previously nominated for her work on “Amistad” and “Malcolm X.”

“This has been a longtime coming,” said Carter as she burst into laughter while accepting her trophy. She dedicated the award to her 97-year-old mother and thanked Spike Lee, who provided her career start in the 1998 film “School Daze”; the director rose from his seat and pumped his fist into the air in response.

Beachler broke down in tears during her acceptance speech with fellow production design awardee Jay R. Hart, saying she “stands here stronger than

she did yesterday.” She helped create the cinematic world of Wakanda, the fictional homeland of the main character.

Beachler, who had worked with Coogler on other films, thanked him and said he “made me a better designer, a better storyteller, a better person.”

“I stand here today because of this man who gave me a better perspective of life,” she said, adding: “I’m stronger because Marvel gave me a chance.”

Beachler and Carter played influential roles in helping “Black Panther” become a cultural phenomenon. Both said they wanted to infuse the pride of the African diaspora into the film.

“Marvel may have created the first black superhero. But through costume design, we turned him into an African king,” said Carter, who drew inspiration for the film’s stylish and colorful garments from her travels to Africa. She spoke with people of the continent to understand the history of each artifact to ensure the different characteristics were represented properly in the film.

The costumes have become so popular that people from different ethnicities - young and older - have worn Black Panther-themed costumes to theaters and at parties. Some even dressed in

Wakanda couture at a pre-Oscar event.

“We wanted to bring the world of Africa to life,” Beachler said while backstage admitting that she was still “freaking out” after her victory.

“I’m still trying to get a handle of all of this,” she said. “All of this is amazing.”

Carter said she hopes their historic Oscar wins can open up more doors for other African-Americans who want to follow her and Beachler’s footsteps.

“Now we won’t have to wait for the first,” she said while backstage. “We now have the first. Finally the door is wide open. I’m mentoring in hopes of raising others up and give them hope.”

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