

Meet the New Chief Judge

By: Hon. Jacob A. Brown & Chambers Staff

After 20 years in private practice, I was honored to be appointed to serve as a United States Bankruptcy Judge by the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals on November 3, 2021, and then as Chief Judge by the United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida as of October 1, 2025. Over the next four years if you have questions for me or ideas on ways the Court can improve and be more consistent and efficient, please do not hesitate to reach out. For this article I recently sat down with my chambers staff for a question-and-answer session. I know they very much enjoyed the opportunity to ask me a myriad of questions and hope you all enjoy it as well.



Judge Brown and Judge Funk judging the Jacksonville District Court's Holiday Cookie Contest. Tough Duty!

Q: Where did you grow up and what was your path to becoming a lawyer?

I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, and lived in the Roswell/Sandy Springs area near the Chattahoochee River until high school when we moved to a small town on the other side of Athens. My father was a real estate lawyer, and I initially rebelled against that as a career path. Plus, I liked and did well in my math and science classes, so I ended up at N.C. State and got degrees in Chemical Engineering and Pulp & Paper Science and Technology. It wasn't until I was working as an engineer post-graduation that I gave thought to going to law school.

Q: What was your path to becoming a bankruptcy lawyer?

Going into law school I thought I would be an environmental lawyer, but the environmental law jobs were few and far between during my 3L year (1997-1998). I then booked my bankruptcy class 1st semester 3L year. I also liked my commercial and business law classes. My Bankruptcy professor, Howard Walthall, encouraged me to look at bankruptcy clerkships. That led me to apply to clerk for Judge Funk, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Q: What’s a moment in your career that reaffirmed why this work matters?

There wasn’t a very specific instance. But over the course of my career in private practice I was fortunate to represent a lot of individuals and small businesses facing financial difficulties and help them work through their issues successfully. There is a satisfaction that comes with achieving that type of outcome.

Q: What’s the best advice you’ve ever received?

While I was working in a textile plant in Waycross, Georgia after my sophomore year at N.C. State, one of the vice presidents took me under his wing and told me to invest in myself and to save a little of each paycheck. I had already started a small investment account with money earned the previous summer, and this reinforced the importance of saving. I still own some of those same stocks today, and some have grown over 20 times in value. I have passed this advice on to young lawyers and others over the years and still do so today. Judge Funk reinforced this with one of his many quips that it is a lot easier to make sacrifices and live poor when you are young than it is when you are old. This also plays in to my ongoing support for financial literacy.

Q: Who has had the biggest influence on your career?

With me, it took a village. There really are too many to name and thank.

Q: What’s the most challenging aspect of being a bankruptcy judge that people rarely see?

It’s a close call between dealing with challenging pro se parties and having to issue rulings that lead to businesses being shut down or taking property away from people.

**Q: Now, let’s get into some fun questions.
What is something people would be surprised to learn about you?**

In 1995, I got my advanced dive certification in Ketchikan, Alaska while working at a pulp mill as an engineer. There’s a certain peace that comes with being 100 feet underwater in 50-degree Fahrenheit water while in a dry suit at night with bioluminescence.

Q: What is your most memorable life experience?

Camping at the top of Mount Sinai on the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt when I was 18.

Q: What are your top three bucket list items?

These change, but for now it would be to through hike the Appalachian Trail, dive the Great Barrier Reef, and hike the Great Wall of China.

Q: What has been your favorite recent vacation?

Last summer, I was fortunate to be able to dive in Bonaire, in the Lesser Antilles with my friend Eric Riesch, who is a world class dive photographer. Around the same time, I also got up to North Carolina and Virginia and logged about 15 miles in the Appalachian Mountains starting at Grayson Highlands State Park in Virginia and probably another 20 or so miles on trails around Morganton, North Carolina.

Q: If N.C. State and Georgia were to play in the College Football National Championship Game, who you would cheer for?

That is a tough one as I root for both. But I would want N.C. State to win but only because Georgia has won a couple already. If this was the NCAA Basketball Championship Game, it would absolutely be N.C. State.

Q: If you were writing a book about your career, what would the title be?

Keep Swinging, I always like a good baseball reference. Things aren't always easy and often you have to brush away troubles and move forward. On my bench, I have a few quotes taped up and one is from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* – “*You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.*”

Q: Who is your favorite baseball player?

Hank Aaron, he played for my favorite team, the Atlanta Braves. He not only had an amazing career but was also an exemplary person.

Q: What is your favorite type of music?

I generally enjoy all live music and attending music festivals.

Q: If you were forced to do karaoke what would your song be?

Forced would be the right word, because even the shower doesn't like to hear me sing, but “Luckenbach Texas” by Waylon Jennings would be the song.

Q: What is a movie you watch to lift your spirits?

Max Dugan Returns. We try and do monthly movie days in Chambers, and this may have to be the next one.

Q: What are some hobbies that help you disconnect from the courtroom?

Fishing, hiking, disc golf, and reading fictional novels. I am particularly into Tom McGuane at the moment and recommend the following short video: *YETI Presents | All That Is Sacred*: <https://youtu.be/HR5HUmj-DJM?si=Ev7M7kiTrWwNcdx>.

Q: Who are three people dead or alive you would want to have lunch with?

Janis Joplin, John F. Kennedy Jr., and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Q: Lastly, any advice to aspiring young lawyers?

Go to medical school! In all seriousness, the practice of law is challenging but can be rewarding. It is not for everyone and it is good to try to figure out early if you have a passion for it, but if you work hard, be patient, invest in yourself, be part of the Bar, and understand that it is a profession, you can make a good living, help people, and reap more than just financial rewards.