

Interview with Tamika Wooten, 2024 Candidate for Maricopa County Attorney

By Clay Latimer, March 2024

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The memory still rankles Tamika Wooten, even years later.

After pleading guilty to stealing a beer from a metro Phoenix Circle K store, her client - a mentally troubled man - was slapped with a 10-year prison term.

Ten years away from his family. Ten years when he couldn't work and pay taxes. Ten years of taxpayers picking up his tab.

"All for stealing a beer," Wooten said.

Wooten says the man's story is just one example of how many senseless mandatory minimum penalties — blind to the facts of a case and the stories of the individual defendants — remain enshrined in law and must be changed.

As the Democratic candidate for Maricopa County Attorney, Wooten vows to try to put things right.

"As a prosecutor, the role is to do justice, not just to put people in prison," she said. "The current administration feels like prison is the answer for everything. It is, of course, for violent crimes.

"But I've had instances of clients who are mentally ill and shoplift - like the man who stole a beer. They're put in prison because of mandatory sentencing to learn a lesson they'll never get.

"Let's provide mental health treatment, job training, and things like that - and not use taxpayer money on something that can be addressed in a different way. You put a person in prison, then they come out and do it again."

Wooten has an unusual vantage point. As an attorney for three decades, she has served as the Chief Prosecutor in the City of Glendale, a defense attorney in private practice, and a judge in multiple municipalities throughout Maricopa County, currently serving as a Judge Pro Tem in Avondale, Surprise, Scottsdale, and Mesa.

"I always like to say that I have the experience of a chief prosecutor, the compassion of the defense attorney, and the wisdom of a judge," she said.

Wooten hopes to unseat incumbent Rachel Mitchell, elevated to the top job in 2022 when Allister Adel resigned following years of misconduct and controversy. Gina Godbehere, a former prosecutor for the city of Goodyear, is also in the Republican primary.

The Maricopa County Attorney's Office, the third largest prosecutorial agency in the country, handles all adult and juvenile felony cases and misdemeanors filed in justice court. It represents all county agencies in civil matters. The office is responsible for making critical decisions about criminal prosecutions, including signing off on whether to seek the death penalty against someone.

Wooten ran in 2020 but came up 18 signatures short and didn't qualify for the ballot in the Democratic primary: "Heartbreaking," she said.

Politics is a family business for the Wootens. Her husband, Duane Wooten, a longtime Phoenix pediatrics specialist, is running in the Democratic primary for the 3rd Congressional District seat vacated by U.S. Senate candidate Joe Gallego. The couple is working as a team to gather signatures to get on the ballot in joint campaign appearances.

Wooten grew up in Pomona, outside of Los Angeles, attended UCLA and University of Arizona Law School and started her career as a Tucson prosecutor. She was Glendale's chief prosecutor for five years beginning in 2003, demonstrating an ability to bring police and communities together

"When I was the chief prosecutor one of the officers was gunned down by someone during a routine traffic stop. I've stood hand in hand with police officers during their grief," she said.

"I can see both sides. I want to bridge that gap between law enforcement and society. You don't see that right now, because there's mistrust on both sides."

"And being a black woman, I know that I can relate to people in a way that most judges and most prosecutors don't. That gives me an advantage when I'm dealing with people."

In addition to judicial reform, abortion rights are a big issue for Wooten.

"They (Republicans) would prosecute a woman for making those personal decisions," she said.

"To me, it's a choice between a woman and her healthcare provider - a personal decision.

"If it's a violent crime, of course, we have to address it," she said. "But let's save prison for those who need to be separated from society."