



Judge Whitney Rivera, who begins her appointment to Snohomish County Superior Court in May, stands in the Edmonds Municipal Court on Thursday, April 18, 2024, in Edmonds, Washington. (Ryan Berry / The Herald)

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Judge thought her clerk ‘needed more challenge’; now, she’s her successor

Whitney Rivera will be the first judge of Pacific Islander descent to serve on the Snohomish County Superior Court bench.

- By [Maya Tizon](#)
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- **LOCAL NEWS** EVERETT

EVERETT — Whitney Rivera was in high school when she found herself sitting in a courtroom for the first time in District Court in Lynnwood.

The Edmonds-Woodway student was participating in a mock trial program as part of a class. No one in her family worked in the legal profession, nor did anyone she knew.

Last week, the longtime public defender reminisced on this origin story as she sat in her judge’s chambers at Edmonds Municipal Court. She was about 16 years old.

“I feel like I drove there, so it was definitely my junior year,” Rivera said, looking up at a black-and-white photo from the mock trial.

All it took was that single elective course — and Rivera knew the courtroom is where she belonged. She would later cross path with the judges and attorneys working that day in a real courtroom, with some even sitting in front of her at Edmonds Municipal Court, where she has served as judge for the past four years.

In March, Gov. Jay Inslee appointed Rivera to fill a vacancy on the Snohomish County Superior Court. She will fill the seat left empty by the retirement of Judge Anita Farris. Rivera was a law clerk for Farris in 2006.

She will join her longtime significant other, Presiding Judge Paul Thompson, on the Superior Court bench. The two previously worked together as public defenders.

“I think it’ll be business as usual for the most part,” Rivera said with a chuckle.

As a descent of the Indigenous Chamorro people of Guam, Rivera is the first Asian American Pacific Islander to serve on the county’s Superior Court bench.

“If you would have asked me back when I was a law clerk, ‘Would you ever be a judge?’ I’d be like, ‘Oh my gosh, that seems like the craziest thing in the world,’” Rivera said.

After high school, she completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Washington in 2003 and earned her law degree from Boston College. She planned to live on the East Coast before family matters drew her back to her hometown.

Farris remembered her former law clerk as one who learned quickly and asked many questions. Farris saw a bright future for Rivera.

“I just felt she needed more challenge,” Farris said in an interview Monday. “At the time, I knew she was going to be a great trial lawyer.”

After six months, Farris referred Rivera to an opening at the Snohomish County Public Defender Association. She had only referred a candidate twice in her career.

“This is the real deal here,” Farris recalled telling the hiring committee.

Rivera worked as a public defender for 14 years. During that time, she briefly served as an attorney at the Washington Appellate Program in Seattle, representing clients in their appeals.

She often took on hard cases, with clients who had few people, if anybody, to advocate for them.

In 2016, Rivera represented a Lynnwood veteran charged with shooting an unarmed teenager in the back, arguing her client was “responding the way the Army trained him to,” The Daily Herald reported at the time. He was sentenced to 32 years in prison.

The next year, Rivera represented an Everett teenager who abandoned her newborn baby in a trash bin, arguing her client was in a dissociative state caused by mental health issues. The young mother served six months in jail.

As a defense attorney, Rivera has come to look at the criminal justice system as a “revolving door,” making it hard for people to exit once they enter it.

“It’s just a lot of time spent getting to know people, their stories and their journeys that led them to become involved in the criminal legal system,” Rivera said. “I try to understand people’s backgrounds and lived experiences, either from the bench or when I was an attorney. Or just in life.”

In November 2020, then-Edmonds Mayor Mike Nelson appointed Rivera as an Edmonds Municipal Court judge, overseeing traffic infractions, misdemeanors and appeals.

As a judge, she empathizes those who sit in front of her.

“It’s important to recognize, every time that I take the bench, that I am representing a branch of government,” Rivera said. “Someone’s going to leave the courtroom with an impression about that branch of government based on the way I conduct myself.”

Rivera believes in a “therapeutic model” of courts that provide resources and services to those frequently going through the system. She referenced Edmonds’ Moral Reconciliation Therapy program, a weekly class for people on probation that addresses “criminal thinking,” substance abuse and mental health.

After going through the program, almost 90% of graduates have not been convicted of another crime, Rivera said.

“We’re really proud of that,” Rivera said.

In her first year on the bench, Rivera learned to think like a judge, not an attorney. She oversaw challenging legal issues, from emotional sentencing hearings to complex bench trials.

“As long as I’m putting in the work and showing the attorneys that I’m putting in the work, trying to come to the best outcome I think is correct based on the law, that people feel satisfied — even if they feel the need to appeal further or any of those things,” Rivera said.

She begins her position as a Superior Court Judge on May 1. She will be up for re-election in November. Already, she has been endorsed from nearly every judge serving in Superior Court, as well as leaders in the county's legal community.

"I absolutely believe Whitney Rivera will do a fine job on the Superior Court bench," county Prosecutor Jason Cummings said Monday. "She has the right disposition and temperament that we look for in judges."

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Maya Tizon covers breaking news in Snohomish County for the Herald. [Read more of Maya's stories here.](#)



A mock trial photo of a young Whitney Rivera, who begins her appointment to Snohomish County Superior Court in May, hangs on her office wall on Thursday, April 18, 2024, in Edmonds, Washington. (Ryan Berry / The Herald)

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