



*Jennifer A. Jones was born and raised in the quiet coastal town of Cameron, Louisiana. She passed the Bar Exam in 1981 and has been serving the people of Cameron Parish with their legal matters since then. In 1991, she even took a case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court . . . and won! Jones has been the Cameron Parish District Attorney since 2015. She's hard-working and driven to success. She's been active in numerous state and national law associations, and in 2015, Jones was selected as Distinguished Louisiana State University Law School Alumna.*

*Jones' family on both her mother and father's side has lived in Cameron Parish since before the Civil War. Her father, Jennings B. Jones, attended Law School at LSU on the GI bill after World War II and in 1949 became the first lawyer to practice law full-time in Cameron Parish.*

# first person

with Jennifer Jones, Cameron Parish DA

by Angie Kay Dillmore

In 1958, his brother Jerry joined the firm and Jerry's son-in-law Glenn Alexander came on board in the mid-70s. Jones' sister Sallie also worked with the firm for several years. Jones says she wanted to be a part of her family's law firm for as long as she can remember, "or at least until I figured out I would never be tall enough to be a Rockette at Radio City Music Hall." Her natural sense of humor is noteworthy, considering the tragedies and heartbreak she has overcome during her life.

In 2004, Jones' father passed away. The following year in May, her 28-year-old son Christopher died in a car accident caused by a drugged driver. He left behind a wife and three young children. Four months later, Hurricane Rita decimated Cameron Parish. 98% of the structures in lower Cameron Parish were gone.

Her and her family's homes were lost. Her law office, serving Cameron residents since 1958, was destroyed. Needing to rebuild herself, she helped approximately 600 families fight insurance companies for hurricane damage coverage.

For Jones' pro bono work post-Rita, she received several accolades: the first ever Public Service Award by the Louisiana Association for Justice (2006), the Women's Commission of Southwest Louisiana Jack V. Doland Outstanding Community Service Award (2007), and the Southwest Louisiana Bar Association President's Award for Outstanding Service

(2007). And just when life started to settle down a bit, Hurricane Ike flooded the parish again in 2008.

Jones' story of perseverance is inspiring, to say the least. She recently shared with Thrive the key turning points in her life, the challenges and obstacles she's overcome, and the source of her triumph over adversity.

### **Describe your journey to becoming a lawyer.**

I majored in Government at McNeese, with an eye towards going to law school, but a few things slowed me down. I married as a freshman at McNeese and my first child, Patrick Hebert, was born on Graduation Day, May 8, 1975, so law school had to wait. I had another son, Christopher Hebert, a year later. My first husband and I were divorced not long after and I finally got to law school [LSU] in 1978 with a two-year-old and a three-year-old. (Jones gave birth to a third son, Michael Bercier, in 1986.) My aunt, Sybil McCall, moved to Baton Rouge with us to help me. I could never have done it without her. After I graduated, I spent a year clerking with the late Judge Earl Veron, the federal district court judge in Lake Charles. I then returned to the family firm. We had a broad range of civil practice, with oil and gas work, family law, and business contracts, but we concentrated primarily on representing people who were injured in accidents, with a special emphasis on admiralty and maritime. In other words, we had a lot of cases for people who were hurt offshore.

### **Tell us about your U. S. Supreme Court case.**

Our client John Wilander was employed by McDermott International as a painting and sandblasting foreman on vessels and platforms in

the Persian Gulf. He was injured in an explosion at work off the coast of Dubai. We tried his case in Lake Charles in federal court, and he obtained a verdict which was affirmed on appeal by the United States Fifth Circuit in New Orleans. McDermott then applied for writs of certiorari (a type of legal appeal) to the United States Supreme Court. McDermott argued that Mr. Wilander should not be covered by the Jones Act, which provides a claim for maritime employees against their employers for negligence, because he wasn't part of the navigational crew. There had been a case in Illinois where the court held that an employee must actually participate in navigation in order to be considered a seaman covered by the Jones Act, but this was not the rule in the Fifth Circuit, where many workers were employed in the oil field industry on jack-up rigs and were considered seaman. The Supreme Court granted writs, in other words, they decided to hear the case. My father insisted that I would argue the case in the Supreme Court, despite advice that we should hire an attorney with Supreme Court experience. At that time, I had only been out of school for eight years. I spent a whole summer writing the brief (in those days we did not have electronic research) and we all went to Washington for the argument in 1989. We won the case in a unanimous opinion by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.





Jones and her son Patrick Hebert on the campaign trail.

**After the devastating life events in 2004-2005, where did you find the strength to go on?**

Somehow, Hurricane Rita saved my life, because it gave me a lot of work to do. The pivotal moment in my career occurred on the day when I went to look at Cameron three days after Hurricane Rita. My house was gone, my sister's house was gone, both my sons' houses were gone. I eventually made my way down to Cameron and had to walk the last quarter mile or so because there was so much debris on the road that it was impassable. I got to the Courthouse Square and there were soldiers there operating machinery to try to clear the roads. One of them told me he had only seen something like this once before – in Baghdad. The shell of my office was there – it had been flooded with eight feet of water. Everything was destroyed, including all my files. I met a man I had known for many years who asked me, "What are we going to do? Your daddy is gone and he can't help us anymore!" I told him I would try. I became very involved in helping Cameron Parish residents with their claims against their homeowner's insurers, which were almost all initially denied on the grounds that the loss of their homes was caused by flood and not windstorm, according to the

insurers. We eventually mediated and settled about 600 claims over about a three-year period. I feel this was my greatest achievement as an attorney.

**Detail one highlight of your career.**

My favorite civil client is South Cameron Memorial Hospital. Our hospital was destroyed in Hurricane Rita, and we managed to put together enough grants and insurance money to rebuild, including a grant from the Bush/ Clinton Hurricane Katrina Fund. I had called and asked to be included in this fund but was originally told that it was only for losses incurred in Hurricane Katrina, not Rita, which certainly did not seem fair to me. The then-Parish Administrator, Tina Horn, and I managed to get a meeting with former-President George H. W. Bush in Houston, who agreed to help us. In December of 2006, President Bush came to Cameron and brought us a check for \$2 million for our hospital! President Clinton could not come, but he sent a representative, George Clooney, the movie star and sexiest man alive, and trust me, he is hotter than a \$2 pistol! What a great day that was! Our hospital reopened in late 2007, one of the first public buildings reconstructed after Hurricane Rita.

**What do you do in your free time?**

A couple years ago I took up painting, and I really enjoy this hobby, along with gardening. I live next door to my sister Margaret, who is a great cook! While most of our church congregation has moved away, I still take great comfort from our church, which is appropriately named Our Lady Star of the Sea.

**What's next for Jennifer Jones?**

I will be 66 on my next birthday and I have no plans for retirement. I will be seeking another term as District Attorney in 2020.

**Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

My greatest challenge as a lawyer, as a mother, as a person, was just getting out of bed and putting one foot in front of another after I lost my son Christopher. I have lost my parents, my home, my business (twice) and I have been divorced twice. None of it can touch losing a child. I survived by throwing myself into my work after Hurricane Rita. My father once told me "Hard work is the best medicine for a broken heart." These were the truest words he ever spoke. I am grateful to the people of this wonderful community for giving me an opportunity to serve them, which gives my life great meaning.

