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Book Review - Justice Leah Ward Sears: Seizing Serendipity

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Off the SHELF

Justice Leah Ward Sears: Seizing Serendipity by Rebecca Shriver Davis (University of Georgia Press, 2017: ISBN 9780820351650, \$34.95)

Justice Leah Ward Sears: Seizing Serendipity is a captivating biography written by Rebecca Shriver Davis, an associate professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Georgia Southern University. Davis manages to tell parts of Sears's personal story while capturing events in her life that helped shape some of the most controversial court rulings of her career. Sears started her career as an attorney in Atlanta, and then worked for Georgia's city, county, and state courts, which culminated in her appointment by then-Governor Zell Miller to the Georgia Supreme Court where she became the first African American woman to serve as chief justice of any state supreme court in the country.

Davis begins telling Sears's story by talking about her love for Broadway musicals as a child and the rejection she felt when she auditioned for the *Sound of Music* but didn't get picked as one of the singing children in the Austrian von Trapp family. When Sears auditioned for that role, neither she nor her family were deterred by the fact that it was highly unlikely that a black child would be picked for such a role. This speaks to Sears's determination to overcome any obstacle put before her.

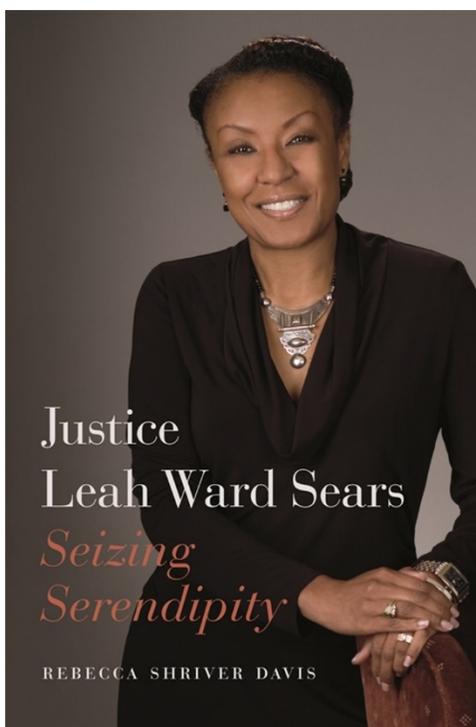
Sears was born in Heidelberg, Germany into a

military family. Sears's father, Thomas Euric Sears, was an Army aviator who made education an important component of growing up. Her mother, Onnye Jean Sears, insisted on her children being well groomed and cultured by traveling to different countries and visiting museums during the summers. After leaving Germany, the family settled down in Maryland and then Savannah, Georgia where her father was stationed at Hunter Army Airfield. There, Sears and her two brothers attended all-white schools and experienced the difficulties that came with growing up in the era of civil rights and the desegregation of schools. Sears graduated from Cornell University and obtained her law degree from Emory University as one of the top 15% of her class.

Throughout her career, Sears was challenged not only because she was younger than her colleagues, but also because she was an African American woman—"twin electoral handicaps" is what political pundit Bill Shipp

called it. Sears won re-election four times to retain her seat on the Supreme Court. She cites two cases, *Vogel* and *Jane Doe*, as two of her most significant rulings. Two other cases that Justice Sears was involved in are the *Marcus Dixon* case and the *Genarlow Wilson* case, both of which garnered national attention.

The pinnacle of Sears's career came after having twice made President Barack Obama's list as a potential replacement for vacancies on the US Supreme Court.



Davis's telling of Justice Leah Ward Sears's story includes personal touches, such as how Sears liked to skate through Piedmont Park with her family, which earned her the moniker the "rollerblading justice."

Anyone who enjoys reading about African American history, Georgia's judicial system, and

history buffs in general will enjoy this first biography of Justice Leah Ward Sears.

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