Theall only candidate to appear at debate

Susan Theall discusses how experience is the most important factor in the election for the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeal.

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Susan Theall, the only of the three candidates to appear, discussed her experience and qualifications for the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeal during a debate-turned-interview at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette on Tuesday, March 14.

“This election is about experience,” she stated from her seat in the Helma B. Constantine Room in the Student Union. “It’s also about integrity. Who do you trust to be the next judge on the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeal?”

Theall has been a licensed attorney for 31 years and served three terms as a judge in the 15th Judicial District. She was elected to that position in 2011 and ran for re-election in 2014, but was defeated by Charlie Fitzgerald.

“It’s really kind of my dream job,” she added about the appellate court position, chuckling.

Theall, 60, is running against Vanessa Anseman, 38, and Candyce Perret, 46, all Republicans, to represent the eight parishes in District 3. This position is one of 12 judgeships on the 3rd Circuit. The winner will serve the remaining eight years of Jimmy Genovese’s 10-year term, who vacated his seat when he was elected to the Louisiana Supreme Court in November.

“This is the craziest election I’ve ever been involved in,” Theall said. “Every day I wake up and there’s something mind-blowing going on. It’s been chaotic.”

She was referring to the clouds of scandal surrounding her opponents.

The Independent and The Daily Iberian both reported on an incident involving Perret in 2004. She was arrested for indecent exposure on a beach in Seaside, Florida, and threatened the arresting officer by telling him she was an assistant district attorney. Perret has never served in that position.

After multiple emails and phone calls, Perret’s campaign manager Marie Centanni did not make Perret available for comment.

Anseman became a lawyer in October 2003 and practiced until 2013, when she stopped to take care of her dying father, who later passed away. Since then, she has dedicated herself to taking care of her children.

She was granted her appeal on March 20 and is now back in the race for the appellate position.

“I think it was important to have a judge face the issue instead of having people speculate,” Theall said.

Theall opined the standards to sit on the appellate court should be raised to 15 or 20 years of experience because “at 10 years, you’re just getting your feet under you.”

The Independent also found Perret’s ex-fiancé, John Houghtaling II, received a restraining order against Perret for stalking, harassing and threatening Houghtaling and his then-girlfriend Brittany Benoit. The digital publication received the case document from a duty judge.

The suit is one of three civil actions Houghtaling filed against Gagnard between October 2004 and February 2006, all of which are sealed. The Independent stated in an article it will attempt to unseal the records.

The Independent also reported that her husband Hunter Perret’s company, Louisiana Specialty Institute, has come under FBI investigation for its billing practices. Candyce Perret reportedly served as counsel for LSI in 2013 and ran the company while her husband received cancer treatment.

“This is truly one of the more bizarre races in Louisiana judicial history,” said Pearson Cross, Ph.D., political science professor at UL Lafayette, in an email, “but enough twists and turns to satisfy even those with the most baroque taste for political drama.”

Theall said she hasn’t chosen to make an issue of Perret’s arrest because “it’s out there.”

“I think it’s unfortunate,” Theall commented. “I believe it’s something voters should look at when evaluating the candidates.

“This is a very important election,” she continued. “To get the opportunity to vote on and choose a judge doesn’t come along very often.”

“All elections are important,” Cross concurred. “They are key to the legitimacy of our democracy and our faith in our public institutions. Nowhere is this adage truer than in races for judicial seats.”

The eight parishes in District 3 are Acadia, Allen, Evangeline, Iberia, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin and Vermilion. The election is March 25.

Kailey Broussard contributed to this article.