

COALITION FOR A BETTER MEMPHIS

Shelby County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire Election Date: May 6, 2014

Name: Sherry Simmons

District for which you are running: District 3

1. QUALIFICATIONS AND BACKGROUND

1. Describe your qualifications for holding the office of Shelby County Commissioner. I am a steadfast conservative candidate for County Commissioner, District 3, who has taught over 4,500 students to be better communicators through speaking, reading, and writing on an intelligent level. I have stressed the importance of civic duty and service to their community that nurtures them. For 35 years as an English teacher, literacy coach, and librarian, I have reached the highest level of professional status that a teacher of English can hold, a Nationally Certified Teacher of English, and I also hold an Information Specialist Certification from the Tennessee Department of Education. I have a Masters degree in English Education and Reading, and I am currently in a doctoral program at the University of Memphis. I am a member of Ellendale Baptist Church and a founding member of the Bartlett Exchange Club. Recognizing the importance of civic organizations and their positive influence in the community, I am a member of Partnership Lakeland; Bartlett and Lakeland Chambers of Commerce; and a proud member of the Senior Centers of Bartlett and Lakeland. As a resident of Shelby County and Bartlett for many years, I have served my entire professional life in Shelby County Schools and literacy foundations in the county and the State of Tennessee. I participate actively in community events, neighborhood watch programs, and homeowners' associations while inspiring others to do likewise. In my years as an educator, new teacher mentor, and media specialist, I thrive in a fast-paced and data-driven environment while using exceptional interpersonal and communication skills. My professional and civic organization encompass a variety of stakeholders who have vision to promote the people who live in Shelby County at large while helping to preserve the unique qualities of the municipalities that make us diverse. As an educator, I reflect continuously on what works and what does not work; set the climate of control with my words, tone, and actions; and keep the mission and vision clearly focused while reaching our goals.

My educational background includes the following:

EDUCATION

The University of Alabama, College of Education 1972-1974.

The University of Memphis, College of Education 1974-1976 Bachelors of Science in Education.

The University of Memphis, College of Memphis 1977-1978 Masters of Science in Teaching.

The University of Memphis 2005- Currently seeking Educational Doctorate Reading Specialist.

2. What events or experiences caused you to decide to run for this office?

When the current Commissioner, Chris Thomas, decided to serve the citizens of Lakeland as the city manager, I saw the opportunity to run in an open seat. I have been involved in local political campaigns in Shelby County for many years and have learned many lessons of successful and unsuccessful elections. As one who loves to serve the community, I know that my education background will be an asset to the Shelby County Commission and the people of Shelby County. Also, with the many new municipal school districts that will open their doors in August of 2014, I feel that my 35 years in education, curriculum design, service-learning, and technology training will be useful to these districts while they are formulating ways to share services, while providing world class education within their municipalities. I know and work well with the mayors of Bartlett and Lakeland and will keep close communication with them as they express the needs of those areas.

Shelby County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire Name: **Sherry Simmons, District 3.**

2. VISION AND STRATEGIES

1. In your opinion, what are the three greatest issues (problems or opportunities) facing Shelby County in the next four years? Some might say that obstacles are opportunities for growth.

Education, economic development, and elder care are the three greatest issues facing Shelby County. **Education is the umbrella over every other issue. Without successful public schools, new businesses will not consider Shelby County as a place to begin.** The teaching profession needs strong representatives who have leadership qualifications on local government boards to be the voice of the students and the profession. Pre-K programs must be included in local school board budgets. Citizens who recently voted “no” to include funding for pre-K education have never been in an urban kindergarten class where many children do not know their colors, the proper spelling or pronunciation of their names, or how to count to ten. Citizens must realize that a literate society starts with the birth of the child and if that child happens to be born in poverty, he will be less likely to have the early literacy foundation needed to learn. Pre-K programs must be funded by local, state, and federal funds to improve the literacy rate. The teaching profession is the one group of professionals who have taught all other professions to be successful. An equal chance at early literacy success for all children is my soapbox as an educator.

Early childhood literacy campaigns are the remedy to improve the problems we see with so many children who come to school unprepared to learn. The only way we can prepare children who enter school to be ready to read is to put them in early intervention programs that prepare them for kindergarten. Reading is the foundation for all other learning. Teacher accountability should not be based on unfair observations or students’ test scores if the public continues to vote against funding for programs that will provide the early training needed, especially in homes where language is not valued, and books and the arts are not a part of the child’s daily life. Benefits in early intervention are real, they are lasting, and they are necessary.

Growth in student learning, not test scores, should be considered as a measure of quality education. When students are motivated to learn, teaching them content is easier. But the key is knowing **what** motivates them to learn. The reality is that in urban situations some students do

not come to school to learn. They come because they feel safer at school than they do in the neighborhood. They come because there is warm food, social interaction, or a teacher who cares about them. Yet if they are years behind in their reading levels, reading textbooks and academic articles written on grade level will not interest them. Local businesses can also provide programs that interest and motivate students to learn.

I will continue my mission to get my fellow local elected officials to fund the early literacy programs we need to put every child on an equal playing field. As a County Commissioner I hope to be appointed to the education committee to be the voice of the children and the teachers who need common sense leaders to make the funds available for early literacy programs. Organizing service-learning projects to be a part of the literacy improvement in every community is just one idea that I have to improve education in Shelby County. The basis for the accountability of the teaching profession will have to be measured by individual student growth percentiles, not standardized tests. If you want to know if a teacher is doing a good job, ask her students. The one hour value added survey is not the answer either. Students' authentic assessment of a teacher's ability is more reliable than a student survey that many of her students can't even read.

Secondly, the Board of Commissioners should project themselves as the unified task force and source of motivation for improved economic development. The media portray the Board of Commissioners as combative and argumentative with one another and that image is not helpful when a collected and cooperative Board is needed to move our economy forward. Diplomacy, respect, and trust are needed so that steadfast business owners and new business developers will see thirteen people who are encouraging their success. While I cannot change the personality of other commissioners, I can set the climate for civility so that economic development and success can be held as our common goal. We must work together for Shelby County and make everyone want to be a part of the solution to combat poverty and improve the economic status of our citizens in every municipality. Inherited poverty is the cause of most learning problems and crime. Schools are the one place where urban children receive hope to move out of the poverty they have inherited. Highly motivated business professionals are the fountainhead of inspiration to cleanse the crime and poverty from our children's lives. We can do this by giving them opportunities to help others. The solution for giving hope to children in poverty is to make them feel empowered to be a part of the solution to improve their lives. The most beneficial way to make children a part of the solution is to involve them in service-learning projects where they are helping people in their community to have better lives. When children see themselves as the solution, they learn, they imagine, they act. Longitudinal studies have proven that children who are involved in real-world, real business learning opportunities are more likely to graduate from high school, show significant gains in academics and attendance, and continue the service to others after graduation. The business community can change its level of participation in the lives of public school children. As members of business oriented service-learning programs, students spend planning time, service time, and reflection time with mentors to learn what strategies are working and what needs to be changed. This kind of time management and reflection produces children who can set priorities and think on the highest level. We need to produce community problem solvers who see themselves as the answer to the economic and social problems that plague them.

Thirdly, the issue of elder care is important to me and all people in Shelby County. There are many senior villages organized in Shelby County already that offer residents a variety of services that make life better, safer, and more affordable. The development of these areas will become even more critical in the next decade. Walkable communities with nearby stores, activity centers, and medical services are important. The municipalities in Shelby County should encourage senior villages as a complement to the many amenities in the area. The issue of elder care and the security of our most deserving residents is foremost on my agenda and I hope to be part of a task force and research study that will bring public awareness, public funds, and improved opportunities for elder care.

2. **How would you recommend we continue to pay down County debt and still fulfill the financial obligations of the County? What budget priorities must take precedence?**

Paying down the county's debt makes solid conservative sense, shows a stability in our county government, and is currently being paid at a rate of 14.2 % according to the FY14 adopted budget of Shelby County. Paying the debt is a budget priority for 2014 in the amount of \$169, 038, 215, and will remain a priority to remain to avoid any default. With this 14% for debt services already in the budget, the revenue to spend for education can still remain at 32% and the revenue for our safety and public services will constitute about 20% of that budget. Our current mayor and Board of Commissioners share my feelings on budget expenditures for education as the highest priority in spending. As I have stated throughout this application, education is the umbrella and the foundation for all other aspects of communities. Education brings intelligent citizens who want to hold jobs, build their financial success, and protect their families and investments. As a conservative, life-long educator, I hold true to a budget that establishes education and public safety as its top priorities. I will expect that all budgets presented by the countywide prime accounts will be justified for each use of funds.

Shelby County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire Name: Sherry Simmons

3. What are your views regarding the best way to fund public education of Shelby County and Memphis children? The current ratio of federal, state, and local funding is working well to insure equal spending on each child in every part of the county. As mentioned in the issue above about economic development, the pairing of businesses and schools is a win-win situation for both. Time spent with school-aged children brings awareness of their needs. For the children, the pairing with successful community partners brings enrichment, higher levels of thinking, and a chance to see themselves as successful adults. One untapped resource that many students and educators are seemingly unaware, is the dual enrollment program funded by the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. On the secondary level in grades 10-12, students who have maintained a 3.0 GPA and have scored a 21+ on the ACT can enroll in college classes while they are still in high school. The Shelby County area students in public schools can attend these dual enrollment classes and receive high school and college credit for the same class while receiving the funding from the TSAC grant available to all high school students who qualify academically. Parents of children in primary grades must know that this free higher education program exists for their children. Many parents believe that a

college education is not affordable for their children so they place no priority on academic pursuit.

4. Some people believe that urban communities should adopt policies that encourage what is called “smart growth.” Do you believe Shelby County should have a general policy about new residential and commercial developments? Shelby County and each municipal government have policies now that encourage smart growth. Being environmentally sensitive is the only way to grow a community. We must look at what is economically viable and sustainable to our residents. Development decisions fair to all parts of the county and cost-effective for the most number of recipients. The walking and biking trails that are being sustained in our county have many health and transportation benefits. Encouraging community and stakeholder collaboration should be the premise of the policy that encourages smart growth. If so, what should that policy be?

Coalition for a Better Memphis Page 3

Shelby County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire Name:

5. Are you satisfied with the economic growth (jobs and income) of Shelby County today? Referring to my very long answer to question one, I explain my position on ways to improve economic growth, income, and education which are all so tightly woven together that one cannot discuss one without the other. Economic development efforts and improved education for all students in Shelby County Schools and the six municipal districts will improve if we work together to insure that all students are getting the best possible education. For some areas of the county, early literacy intervention is necessary to equalize the playing field. I support any incentive to get the business community involved in the schools and neighborhoods where literacy levels are critically low. These areas are our priority to get the children interested in learning and reading. A literate society is one that pursues economic growth and attractive cultural celebration of life.

Coalition for a Better Memphis Page 4

Shelby County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire Name:

3. IMPROVING THE SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

1. What do you regard as the greatest obstacle or barrier to economic growth in Shelby County today? What can the County Commission do to reduce that impediment? We must all work together and see ourselves as Shelby County. People who live in the smaller municipalities should have their unique lifestyles but should not ignore the largest part of the county in which they reside. Our Shelby County School system along with the six new municipal school districts must all have the same goal: world class education for every student in our county. The greatness of our school systems will attract new businesses, reduce crime, produce a society of entrepreneurs that build homes, pay taxes, and contribute to a community of people who want to

empower one another. The way we sell ourselves is to work together without contention with all the municipal areas that comprise Shelby County. No one area of the county can disprize any other area that makes up the whole of Shelby County. We cannot say that we are an island apart from the main. "No man is an island," as John Donne stated on his death bed. We do not want to get near our "deathbed" as a community before we reach out to one another. We are all enhanced by the successes of every municipal success. After all, we have the greatest distribution capacity in the country, so we must have the same goals: world class education, entice new businesses, enhance our camaraderie as community of people who are diverse and yet willing to help each other to succeed.

2. What is your philosophy about offering incentives to companies that are considering major new investments or job expansions in Shelby County? Companies that have the smart growth philosophy should be encouraged to invest in our county. As part of their effort to make their new residency benefit the county, employers should be encouraged to be a part of the solution to strong relationships with our schools. Any business who want to help Shelby County grow must see that that growth must start in the schools and neighborhoods. Our Shelby County School system along with the six new municipal school districts must all have the same goal: world class education for every student in our county. The greatness of our school systems will attract new businesses, reduce crime, produce a society of entrepreneurs that build homes, pay taxes, and contribute to a community of people who want to empower one another. The way we sell ourselves is to work together without contention with all the municipal areas that comprise Shelby County. No one area of the county can disprize any other area that makes up the whole of Shelby County. We cannot say that we are an island apart from the main. "No man is an island," as John Donne stated on his death bed. We do not want to get near our "deathbed" as a community before we reach out to one another. We are all enhanced by the successes of every municipal success. After all, we have the greatest distribution capacity in the country, so we must have the same goals: world class education, entice new businesses, enhance our camaraderie as community of people who are diverse and yet willing to help each other to succeed.

Coalition for a Better Memphis Page 5

Shelby County Commissioner Candidate Questionnaire Name:

3. What is your position on consolidation of city and county governments? Consolidation is not the answer to improve our schools, promote economic growth, or care for our elderly. Smaller groups of people working within their municipalities can accomplish these goals. When one community finds a way to make improvements, they should be willing to share those ideas and even create a small task force that will nurture their surrounding areas to gain the benefits of what works. We won't be safer, smarter, or more economically sound if we consolidate the city and county governments.

4. When you complete your service as commissioner, what do you want your legacy to be? I want my legacy to be: The positive results of Sherry Simmons' positive words and works helped Shelby County become the most attractive, highly educated, economically stable county in Tennessee.