Making a Marriage Work

Jessica Holmes ’06 went skeptically to a match she’d never dreamed of. She almost broke it off, even. Now, if you want to run with Wake County’s youngest commissioner, you’d better be all in.

by Barry Yeoman
few days before Jessica Holmes' 06 was scheduled to talk about hunger at UNC's Friday Center last February, she read an article that made her abandon her prepared slides. The Trump administration, as a cost-cutting measure, had proposed slashing the benefits that families receive through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Those “food stamps,” as they are informally called, would be replaced by boxes filled with nonperishable food chosen by the government.

The news sparked memories. Long before she was elected chair of the Wake County Board of Commissioners, Holmes was a child from Pender County near the coast, getting shuttled from one residence to another, including homeless and domestic violence shelters. She knew what hunger felt like. She knew, too, what it meant to suffer the kinds of suffering she experienced as a child...

Imagine that you’re 8 years old. You are the eldest of five children. You walk into the kitchen and you open the refrigerator. And nothing’s there but condiments. You think to yourself: “What can I make with ketchup and mustard that is going to feed these four children that I am responsible for?”

— Jessica Holmes ’06

“Flow with me for a minute,” she said, abandoning the lectern to get closer to her audience. She knew, too, what it meant to “be all in with me”...

I was living my best life.

The day of the meeting, Holmes aired her frustration in a public Facebook post.

“I was told to calm down because affordable housing will be the ‘new transit’ for 2017 and … this will make it difficult for me to be vote-chase,” she wrote. “Well, I would rather be a leader than serve in a leadership position.”

To Holmes, more than housing was at stake. She claims that the white male commissioners on her original slate had been meeting informally and not inviting her. That furthered her belief that her priorities were not being matched.

“As a young black woman, there are times when the expectation is that I smile and let the guys handle it. I worked very hard to stand on my merit, to speak my truth, and refused to be the smiling, hap-
gardens, raised hogs and hunted for bear, every day. The extended family tended her in. Finally, there were reliable meals "verge of a mental breakdown." The stress drove her to what she calls the er wanted to be a burden," she said, even as nev- eat more of the dwindling supplies. "I nev-
ghetti. (The latter remains a comfort food
noodles and Chef Boyardee canned spa-
stay with family members, leave again." 5, "we were on a circuit of go back, leave
apart." Starting when Holmes was about
‘my tribe’: a group of attor-
usually with these stories of how I had impacted them." She had not formally resigned — with calls and messages pleading for her reconsider. "People kept contacting me with the full force of a community that is ready to stand up for the issues that matter to us.” — Jessica Holmes ’06

73, was struck by Holmes’ reticence in her drama classroom at Pender High School. “She didn’t talk at first,” Whiteside said. “I didn’t think I had anything worthy to say.” When Holmes did speak, it was through clenched lips. “Jessica, you’ve got to open your mouth when you talk,” Whiteside recalls saying. “You’ve got something to say, and it’s important!” Whiteside’s persistence shank some-thing loose. Holmes took increasingly larger roles in school plays. “In that class, I found my voice. Performing took me to a different place. It allowed me to be some-one else.”

Some teachers took on an almost parental role. Whiteside sometimes let Holmes stay in her house, to spare the teen a two-hour bus ride home. So did Holmes’ tennis coach. When Holmes was named homecoming queen, the coach helped her change into a borrowed dress. “And she was the person waiting for me on the field when I was crowned. I walk out, and there she is with a dozen roses.”

As an undergraduate at Carolina, Holmes worked for the law school’s Center for Civil Rights, which collaborated with poor and minority communities on issues like school funding. (The UNC System Board of Governors since has stripped the center of its power to provide legal ser-
ices.) In Chapel Hill, Holmes found what she called “my tribe”: a group of attor-
leaders oriented toward civil rights. One of them, Anita Earls, hired Holmes after law school at the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, a nonprofit she founded that does litigation and community orga-
ning around voting rights, environmen-
tal racism and criminal justice.

Holmes spent much of 2011 driving around North Carolina, explaining to voters the high stakes of redistricting and teaching them how to advocate for fair representation. “She was in great demand because she had a wonderful ability to take complex legal rules and make them understand-
able to ordinary folks,” said Earls, who was elected in November to the N.C. Supreme Court. “And she would go any-
where. Church basement, 10 people, Jessi-
ca was there talking about redistricting.” Holmes had established both her gravi-
tas and her moral commitment young. She would not serve on a board of commission-
ers that didn’t take her seriously.

Leader and friend

After Holmes’ 2016 resignation an-
nouncement, she says, she was deluged with calls and messages pleading for her to reconsider. “People kept contacting me with these stories of how I had impacted them.” She had not formally resigned — and the next day, she announced that she would remain on the board after all. "And that week, she says, was a turning point. “It’s no longer me as an individual advertis-
ing. When I speak, I speak with the full force of a community that is ready to stand up for the issues that matter to us.” — Jessica Holmes ’06

Holmes understands hunger firsthand. She helped collect food and supplies for Hurricane Florence victims — this whole truckload went to her native Pender County. As a child, Holmes ate a lot of ramen

As an undergraduate at Carolina, Holmes was a product of the 1980s and ‘90s, when the crack epidemic that ensnared North Carolina spread from pipeline terminals like Charlotte and Wilming-
to the state’s rural areas. In Pender County, Holmes and her mother lived with a crack-smoking man who, she says, abused them both. It took several attempts before her mother found the courage to leave. "Back then the mantra, particularly in a small, rural, religious community, was that families belong together," Holmes said. Her mother would take the children to shelters around North Carolina, but "there was always this pressure on my

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Holmes has made affordable housing a signature issue. She resigned — briefly — over it. The head of Habitat for Humanity of Wake County said Holmes established herself as a person who follows through on her promises. And she walks the walk, up the rungs of a ladder.

Being on the roof
Ask her acquaintances to evoke visual images of Jessica Holmes, and few will involve the commissioner sitting in a meeting. The woman whose political career is driven by her own personal history is fueled by contact with the families she serves, especially the children.

Habitat for Humanity’s Campbell visualizes Holmes on a ladder, swinging a hammer, during a 2017 “build day.” About two dozen elected officials had come to Raleigh’s Crosstowne neighborhood, at Holmes’ invitation, to install vinyl siding, meet future homeowners and learn about the county’s affordable housing needs.

“She’s not just there for a photo op,” Campbell said. “She loves being on the roof.”

Smart Start’s Dowdy thinks about Holmes sitting at a tiny table in a prekindergarten classroom, helping a bespectacled girl cut pictures from a magazine. The commissioners had recently voted to fund early childhood education, and Dowdy wanted Holmes to meet “18 children who would have not been there without her effort.” Fellow Commissioner Greg Ford ’03 (MSA) carries two contrasting images. One is of Holmes firing up a crowd at the Wake County Democratic Convention with the news that she was running unopposed in 2018. The other is of Holmes having dinner with Ford, his husband and their three children.

“She’s not just there for a photo op. She loves being on the roof.”
— Kevin Campbell, president of Habitat for Humanity of Wake County

And, at the same time, she is the warm and generous friend.”
Barry Yeoman is a freelance writer based in Durham.