

Keeping the Record Straight with Teneshia Hudspeth



By Katie Tong

Texas' 254 counties vary greatly in size, ranging from the smallest county of Loving (pop. 100) all the way up to Harris County, whose population of 4.7M+ makes it the third largest in the nation. One thing that all the counties have in common, regardless of size, is that each is staffed by a County Clerk's office, headed by a County Clerk elected every four years.

What does it mean to be a County Clerk? While the

magnitude of duties vary by the size of the county, Harris County Clerk Teneshia Hudspeth describes the office as, "We record all the major events in your life."

The County Clerk's Office is, quite literally, all about keeping the record straight, or to be more accurate, the records, as they are responsible for documenting everything from birth certificates to marriage licenses, to real estate purchases and property liens, to business filings (such as assumed name certificates and TABC records), to Wills, partition agreements and finally, estate filings when probated upon death. "At some point in your life, you'll come through this office," Hudspeth says.



Harris County Clerk Teneshia Hudspeth.

In addition to the public's records, the county clerk's office also services the County Commissioner's court, recording and maintaining their minutes, as well as those of Harris County's four probate courts and four county civil courts at law (civil cases that are not processed through the district court).

The County Clerk's office, Hudspeth explains, is not about shuffling paperwork in a dark basement, but is paramount a public-facing office, required to intake documents from and provide them back to citizens who need them. One of her key goals, she says, is to continue to improve technological accessibility, programs and education to

make it easier for everyone to submit and retrieve the records they need.

Teneshia Hudspeth has been the Harris County Clerk for the past two years. First elected in a special election in 2020, she was re-elected to a full four-year term last November. While only two years in at the helm of the ship, Hudspeth is no newcomer, having worked in the office for the last 17 years, gaining experience and working her way up the ladder.

Hudspeth grew up in Austin, but moved to Houston in 1999 to attend Texas Southern University where she studied Communications and Broadcasting. Towards the end of her education, she

See County Clerk page 3

County Clerk from page 1

was selected as a Mickey Leland Congressional Intern, a public policy program initiated as a joint effort between TSU and the University of Houston, to send eight interns to Washington D.C. each year. Thus Hudspeth spent the winter of 2003 interning for Texas Congressman Chet Edwards.

That experience, said Hudspeth "birthed into something really great. I learned how D.C. worked, but also how the work he (Edwards) did back home reflected back in the district that he served. So it was a bigger perspective. I learned politics on another level."

While Hudspeth originally envisioned a career as a broadcast journalist, at the same time she always had a strong interest in politics. Her D.C. internship experience, she says, shifted her perspective to see that- "Hey, I can do communications and politics and public service!"

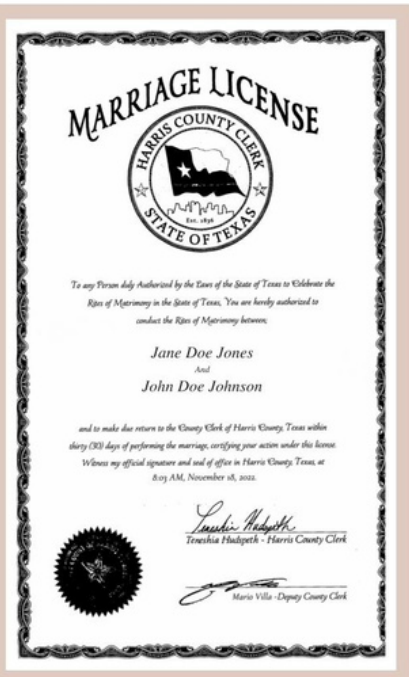
Following her internship, Hudspeth returned to Houston and completed her senior year, after which a job opened up in the elections department of the Harris County Clerk's office. "[Then-County Clerk] Beverly Kaufman took a chance on this college kid," said Hudspeth. "She'd take me to conferences with her...I think I was kind of training for county clerk

then; I just didn't realize it."

After starting out as an administrative assistant, Hudspeth moved to become Community Outreach coordinator, then Public Information Officer, and then Director of Communications for the department. Eventually she was promoted to Deputy Director, essentially the second-in-command to the County Clerk.

In early 2020, then-County Clerk Dianne Trautman resigned mid-way through her term. An interim appointment was in order, but Hudspeth remained the Deputy Director, while Chris Hollins was brought in to head the office until a special election could be held in November. Hudspeth made the decision to throw her hat in the ring and was elected with over 53% of the vote over former County Clerk Stan Stanart (2011-2018), under whom she had worked for seven years. In 2022, Hudspeth once again won out over Stanart and was elected to her first full term.

In her own words: Following are excerpts from our interview with County Clerk Hudspeth (edited for space) on several topics.



Marriage Licenses are one of the many documents handled by the County Clerk's office.

On the difference between the Harris County Clerk and the Harris County District Clerk [currently Marilyn Burgess].

"The district clerk services all of the other courts, from district to criminal to civil."

"The biggest piece that the

district clerk does is the jury assignments...they also handle the passport system as well."

On not getting the interim County Clerk appointment in 2020 when Dianne Trautman resigned mid-term.

"I interviewed [for the interim job]; they appointed Chris Hollins...When I was not chosen, I just said okay... looks like I'm gonna run for office. The decision wasn't that easy. I'd been behind the scenes for so long."

On Harris County's decision in 2020 [prior to Hudspeth's election] to hand election operations over to an Elections Administrator, rather than be managed by the County Clerk's office as they had been historically.

"It was a very hard pill for me to swallow, not to be the clerk of all things, but as time went on, I learned how to pivot just like the rest of the world. You say, okay... we figure it out. And what I knew very quickly was that we needed to rebrand the office very fast because everybody only knew the county clerk for elections. Nobody knew what the heck else we really did." "It's allowed me to focus in bet-

ter on the processes on this side... frankly, most of the time the focus of this department was elections."

"So sometimes what you might not understand at the time, and you may not be too ecstatic about at the time, end up being what's best for the office...I'm just ecstatic to be the County Clerk."

On her future goals:

"I have a lot of ideas and I think there's many ways this office can pivot."

"While we're not quite there yet, my thought is how do we take this office from behind the veil of government operation and get to working class people in every sector of this very large county... sort of create this 'clerk on the run.' That's what I look to in the future, is creating a mobile service."

"The other documents, how can we create some education about them? How do you get property records? Also, how do you navigate county government altogether? Because not everyone is coming here at the best of times when they have to experience our office, and so when they do, to have the tools and know where to go."

"Part of what I'm doing is creating relationships with other county officials and other county offices... creating more pipelines of communication... how do I streamline

See County Clerk page 8

County Clerk from page 3

from getting a record of my deed to going over to the tax office and the appraisal district - how do I make that a...friendlier environment? Versus, you know, waiting on the phone for 20 minutes...all of the things that make people cringe when it comes time to encounter county government."

On steps she's taken thus far.

"We created a program called Back to School Birth Certificate Saturdays. In 2021, my very own son was starting kindergarten and I kind of took for granted, hey, I could just walk to the third floor of my building [for a copy of his certificate]. But I started thinking, I can imagine how many other parents would need this that can't get to our office on Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

"I started asking our staff, 'hey have we ever opened up on a Saturday?' And I said, let's see if we can do a program where we can open our doors, and at the time, I just said, one Saturday."

"We did our downtown office the first time...and people were lined up an hour and half before outside, hundreds of people, and I said 'I think we're on to something'...again, sort of taking a normal governmental operation and saying how do we really make it work for the community...My mother was a single mother, work-



The County Clerk's office maintains archives that go back to the 1800s. In 2021, documents were lent to the Buffalo Soldiers Museum for an exhibition on the 1917 Camp Logan Mutiny (above).

ing class people, you know,

"So I said okay, let's try another Saturday. This time we did it on our Chimney Rock annex and this time we had people lining up two hours before... We had twice the amount of people the first time around. We were recognized nationally by the National Association of Counties for creating this program that could be created amongst other county clerks' offices. Now it's an annual program.

"This year we had a backpack sponsor...and then we had a fraternity that said hey we want to help people get these for free. It's \$23 for a birth certificate, but if you have four or five children, it

adds up."

(Birth certificates for anyone born in Texas are now also available to order online at <https://www.cclerk.hctx.net> under the Personal Records tab.)

On common misconceptions of the County Clerk's job.

"I'm the clerk, so [some people think] I'm the clerk of taxes, that I'm the tax assessor, that I'm the appraisal district...you'd be surprised the inquiries I get on a regular basis."

On little known facts about services provided by the County Clerk's office.

"We have a mental illness ward off of Hwy 288 where we actually intake the public that come in for any type of mental illness services. We do the intake for them, before they are serviced through the court or medical system. A lot of people don't know that."

"We also house the Harris

County archives that go back to the early 1800s. We have a warehouse [at 11525 Todd St., Ste. 300/(713) 274-9680] and we have all sorts of archival information that we use and we share amongst many different historical organizations."

"We file and record animal brands. Individuals are supposed to file an actual picture of the animal brand and it has to be renewed every ten years. Animals get out of pastures and you're trying to figure out the owner. You're able to come to the clerk's office and find out."

On key qualities for a County Clerk.

"Some of the most important skills are being a really good communicator, and a good listener - those two go hand in hand in any elected or leadership position that you aspire to be in. The other thing to aspire to is understanding the different levels of government. If you're wanting to be a county clerk one day, you're gonna want to need to learn about county government and what that job really entails.

"For me, I have interns every semester in my office through the public policy program at UH, at TSU, the local colleges, HCC. You might intern in my office and at the same time, you're learning all about county government. We might have some commissioners or future judges, future county attorneys...again, creating some sort of pipeline."

Another program Hudspeth has overseen since being elected is the Valentine's Day Express Weddings, a program put on in collaboration with the Heritage Society (www.heritagesociety.org).

org/express-weddings-valentines-day), where couples can keep the romance but cut the cost and tie the knot on the 14th, something that is not just economically advantageous to many, but was crucial during the high days of the Covid pandemic.

"In the middle of Covid... some people were getting married because they needed to be on their partner's insurance. That's the story that's not told. There was a great deal of that...and for some people, Covid didn't go well for their families, and it might have been a final wish for someone to get married before they died... there was this drastic need."

Even as Covid levels reduced, the program has continued as it has proven popular. "It's kind of a cool place to be on Valentine's Day because you have all these folks coming in to get married...they have their dresses on...it's a pretty fun day for us," says Hudspeth.

For herself, Hudspeth married her husband in 2015, prior to holding the Clerk's position where her name now appears on every marriage license issued. "I won't say I won't come back and get a copy and have my name on there, kind of commemorative, right?" she laughs, adding that the marriage license has now been redesigned "to be more equitable and represent all relationships."

On her job as a whole, Hudspeth says, "I really love it."

"I enjoy every single bit of it. You don't work at an office this long - I just celebrated 17 years - to be able to serve from this perspective...It's rewarding, and some of the folks that work in that office, I've grown up with, we've worked together for years, so it's a really family environment.

"I think what sets me apart is I didn't just run for the office, I worked in the office. I worked my way up, so there's a sense of pride and that sense of respect is there, because I've been one of them. It's a really neat dynamic and I'm very grateful for it."

Be a Blessing!
Sunday Worship In-Person and Online
 8:30 a.m. Traditional Service
 9:45 a.m. Chinese Service
 11:00 a.m. Contemporary Service
 Watch at www.faithbellaire.org

FAITH LUTHERAN CHURCH 信义教会
 4600 Bellaire Blvd. at Ave. B | 713-664-3048
www.faithbellaire.org

Let Us Work On Your Car!
Joe's Auto Repair
 Family Owned & Operated Since 1994

Quality SERVICE
 MEANS DEPENDABLE
 TRANSPORTATION

713-662-0428 7040 Stella Link across from Pershing
 Cody's Wrecker Service 713-664-7764