

# 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*



A 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 have an outsider dictate your diet.

"Flow with me for a minute," she said, abandoning the lectern to get closer to her audience at the N.C. Hunger Leaders Conference. At 34 and a 2009 alumna of UNC's law school, Holmes has a stage presence cultivated in a high school drama class: slow, crisp cadences; disciplined hand gestures; a gift for never breaking eye contact.

"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?'"

Holmes' family received SNAP benefits but couldn't stretch them for an entire month. "Well-intentioned people" tried to fill the gap by dropping off packages of groceries. "[They] almost always had peanut butter," she said. "I don't like peanut butter." That's why the idea of government food boxes peeves her: "No matter how many times you put an item in front of a

child ... if they don't like it, they're not going to eat it."

Until Holmes took the microphone, much of the day's conversation had taken place at the thousand-foot level, with talk of policy levers and return on investment. Holmes connected that policy to the eyes of a second-grader — her eyes — staring into an empty fridge. "It was very brave," says Julie Cox, advocacy manager of the Raleigh-based Inter-Faith Food Shuttle.

Since winning her first election in 2014, Holmes has mined the stories of her childhood to advocate for the most vulnerable residents of North Carolina's second-largest county, which includes Raleigh and its suburbs. Her supporters describe a leader who works relentlessly — and effectively — to diminish the type of suffering she experienced as a child.

"She is at the top of the heap for next-generation leaders in North Carolina and the nation," said John Wilson '71 (MEd), who retired in 2011 as executive director of the National Education Association and now lives in Raleigh. That evident potential helped lead the GAA Board of Directors to naming her one of its Distinguished Young Alumni in 2018. "Jessica has been the strongest voice for public school funding and affordable housing and has led that fight in a very real way," Wilson said. "She just goes and does stuff. If she sees a problem, she goes full force at solving it."

#### 'I was living my best life'

The Democratic wave that U.S. voters saw in 2018 arrived four years earlier in Wake County. The board of commissioners had a 4-3 Republican majority, and all four GOP-held seats were up for grabs. Three of the Democratic challengers were white men. The fourth was Holmes, an African-American woman working at the time as a lawyer for the N.C. Association of Educators.

She was a reluctant candidate. After moving back to North Carolina from New York in 2012, she was serving on organiza-

tional boards and assisting the NAACP-led Moral Monday movement. "I was living my best life," she said. Then, in 2013, a local politician tried to recruit her to run for office.

"I Googled this board of commissioners you're talking about," she recalls telling him over a home-cooked brunch. "None of them look like me. Nor do I believe that board, or Wake County, would be receptive to a Podunk girl coming from Pender County. I'm not even married. I don't even have a dog. I don't have any kids. So I can't even do a campaign photo shoot." Plus, she said, "did you not notice I'm also black?"

The politician was prepared, Holmes said. "He literally flipped it on me: 'Did you know the median age of Wake County is 35? Young people who are black, and women, and people who are unmarried — don't you think they deserve a voice? Why won't you be that voice for them?'"

"Hot damn," Holmes thought. "I got out-lawyered by a nonlawyer."

The four Democrats ran as a slate advocating better funding for schools, parks and transit. All four won, giving the party a 7-0 lock on the board.

Holmes' victory attracted particular attention. At 30, she was the youngest commissioner ever elected to the Wake board. She was accomplished and charismatic. And whatever reticence she had before the election had vanished. "Everything I am, moving forward, I give to Wake County," she said at the swearing in. "Today, I marry you."

#### 'Be all in with me'

Holmes jumped into her new role with postnuptial zeal. "When I first met her, I thought, 'Oh, she's just naïve about the process,'" said Kevin Campbell, president of Habitat for Humanity of Wake County. But she established herself as someone who follows through on her promises, he said — "unlike really anybody."

Holmes helped launch county-funded food pantries at high-poverty public schools, from which students and parents can bring home fresh produce and meat. She led the winning effort to offer paid parental leave for all county employees. And she joined the board of Wake County Smart Start, a prekindergarten program that was suffering from inadequate state support. "She used [her] megaphone with



business and civic leaders to secure [local] funding," said Pam Dowdy, the executive director. Holmes, who had attended an early-childhood program, also helped convince her county colleagues to throw in public money, which Wake County never had done. "She challenges everybody to step up their game: 'If I'm going to be all in, be all in with me,'" Dowdy added.

That all-in energy often was directed toward affordable housing. In Wake County, the median home listing price is \$352,900, and the median monthly rent is \$1,495, according to the real estate site Zillow. Holmes considers this a crisis but says her efforts initially faced resistance. "I remember having conversations in very progressive circles and having people tell me it was not the role or responsibility of county government to ensure that people had housing." But she plugged away, and over two years she built support for a committee that would develop a 20-year affordable-housing plan.

Then, just before the 2016 meeting at which the commissioners were supposed to establish the committee, Holmes learned from "a little birdie on staff" that the vote would be delayed. (Commissioner John Burns told reporters he had requested the delay to gather more information on the selection process.)

"I went nuts. We were at a crossroads as it related to affordable housing. And, quite honestly, my colleagues were saying certain things in the community but then were not backing up their words at the board table."

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 elected" as vice chair, 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 didn't matter to them.

"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-

py-faced commissioner when I was not being given respect at the board table.”

One of those commissioners, Burns, said he did meet casually with colleagues, including Holmes, but avoided groups larger than three in observance of the state’s Open Meetings Law. “There were no informal meetings where we decided what we were going to do.”

Two weeks later, Holmes told the board she was stepping down. “I had reached a boiling point.”

### ‘I found my voice’

If this resignation announcement seemed rash, consider that Holmes was never in politics for the prestige. She had a specific agenda: to make sure no child suffered the ordeal she faced growing up. And she had no intention of staying in a position where her efforts would be thwarted.

She was a product of the 1980s and ’90s, when the crack epidemic that ensnared North Carolina spread from pipeline terminals like Charlotte and Wilmington into 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 mom to go back and to not tear the family apart.” Starting when Holmes was about 5, “we were on a circuit of go back, leave again, go back some more, leave again, go stay with family members, leave again.”

As a child, Holmes ate a lot of ramen noodles and Chef Boyardee canned spaghetti. (The latter remains a comfort food for her.) Toward month’s end, she pretended not to be hungry, so her siblings could eat more of the dwindling supplies. “I never wanted to be a burden,” she said, even as the stress drove her to what she calls the “verge of a mental breakdown.”

That changed at the start of fourth grade, when Holmes’ grandmother took her in. Finally, there were reliable meals every day. The extended family tended gardens, raised hogs and hunted for bear, deer and raccoon. And her grandmother,



**Holmes understands hunger firsthand. She helped collect food and supplies for Hurricane Florence victims — this whole truckload went to her native Pender County.**

who never finished high school, made Holmes read newspapers, magazines and the Bible. “If you’re going to live here, you’re going to get your education,” Holmes remembers her saying. “You’re not going to run these streets.”

Holmes took academics seriously. Her teachers became steadying presences in her life. One of them, Rochelle Whiteside

**“It’s no longer me as an individual advocating. 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

’73, was struck by Holmes’ reticence in her drama classroom at Pender High School.

“She didn’t talk at first,” Whiteside said. Holmes: “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 shook something 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 someone else.”

Some teachers took on an almost parental role. Whiteside sometimes let Holmes sleep at 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 services.) In Chapel Hill, Holmes found what she called “my tribe”: a group of attorney-mentors 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 organizing around voting rights, environmental 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 understandable to ordinary folks,” said Earls, who was elected in November to the N.C. Supreme Court. “And she would go anywhere. Church basement, 10 people, Jessica was there talking about redistricting.”

Holmes had established both her gravitas and her moral commitment young. She would not serve on a board of commissioners that didn’t take her seriously.

### Leader and friend

After Holmes’ 2016 resignation announcement, 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.

That week, she says, was a turning point. “It’s no longer me as an individual advocating. When I speak, I speak with the full force of a community that is ready to stand up for the issues that matter to

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COURTESY OF JESSICA HOLMES '06

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.

us.” Since her return, there have been conflicts on the board and exchanges of harsh words. But there also have been signal achievements.

In 2017, the affordable-housing committee produced — and the commissioners adopted — a 152-page long-term plan that calls for land use changes and both public and private investment. Holmes headed the 32-member panel.

“She was able to keep people at the table,” said member Shana Overdorf, former executive director of the Raleigh/Wake Partnership to End and Prevent Homelessness. “People saw her being a part of that process every single step of the way.” Last year, after Holmes became board chair, the commissioners passed a budget with a property tax increase that will raise \$15 million annually for housing.

The same budget, passed in June, increased public school funding about 10 percent, or by \$45 million — less than the school board had requested but considerably more than the county manager had recommended. Two million dollars is dedicated to counselors, social workers and psychologists.

#### 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.

“Here she was, lying on the kitchen floor, letting our twin girls paint her fingernails these horrible mixed colors, some with glitter, with stickers. And here she is just laughing and having a great time. They put probably 50 hair clips in her hair.

**“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 that’s Jessica’s realness,” Ford said. “She’s all of those things. She is the commanding leader at the dais.

And, at the same time, she is the warm and generous friend.”

*Barry Yeoman is a freelance writer based in Durham.*

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