



# Hon. Anuraag "Raag" Singhal

## U.S. District Judge, Southern District of Florida

by Scott Strauss



Scott Strauss is a trial attorney in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, who focuses his practice in federal court in the areas of civil and criminal law. Scott is a former federal prosecutor at the U.S. Attorney's Office. ©2021 Scott Strauss. All rights reserved.

**Scott R. Strauss**  
PARTNER

Quintairos, Prieto,  
Wood & Boyer, P.A.  
Fort Lauderdale Office  
2400 East Commercial  
Boulevard, Suite 520  
Fort Lauderdale,  
Florida 33308  
P: (954) 523-7008  
F: (954) 523-7009  
E: scott.strauss  
@qpwblaw.com

For Raag Singhal, becoming a federal judge was never part of the plan. In fact, when he was a senior in high school, his government teacher told him he would never become a lawyer because he was too quiet. Couple that with the still prevalent expectation in the late 1970s and early 1980s that Asian-American kids were likely to go into science-oriented fields, and law didn't seem to be on the radar.

Judge Singhal was born in Philadelphia in 1963, four years after his parents arrived in America from the small north Indian town of Aligarh. His parents were raised while India was under British rule, and, although they saw India win her freedom to some extent, they appreciated the opportunity and rule-oriented culture offered in the United States.

"My parents' main tenets were deeply-rooted beliefs in God, family, education and hard work. Only once they were satisfied that boxes were checked in those core areas could I go and do things others were doing. It led to a somewhat quiet, isolated life but it was the best life for me," Singhal recalls. He adds,

I remember teaching myself how to play baseball by throwing against a pitchback and watching players like Hank Aaron, Pete Rose, and Tom Seaver. I taught myself how to play tennis by hitting balls off a cement wall and watching Vijay Amritraj, Bjorn Borg, and Jimmy Connors. But what I was really drawn to was long distance running. I think for me that was a way to stay healthy, gain peace of mind, think and plan and outrun everyone else. I wasn't the fastest, but I could usually run the farthest.

Indeed, Judge Singhal has run in numerous ultramarathons and credits those races with solidifying his persistence.

Perhaps it is because of that upbringing that Judge Singhal's well-known qualities in the legal community include persistence, attention to rules and preparation, a willingness to help, and compassion. Ultimately, his legal career took him through stints as a civil practitioner, prosecutor and eighteen-year criminal



defender. In each job, on every case, Judge Singhal's goal was to stand in the shoes of his client, feel what they were feeling, and convey that to the other side, the judge or the jurors.

In 2019 and 2020, President Donald J. Trump nominated five federal judges to the U.S. District Court in the Southern District Florida—all subsequently confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Collectively, these outstanding jurists comprise nearly one-third of the active judges within the district. Each of them brings a unique and diverse background to the federal bench, but among them, Judge Singhal's journey is extraordinary, underscoring the importance of perseverance, considering the adversity that he endured along the way.

Beginning in July 2005, Judge Singhal applied to serve as both county and circuit judge in the state of Florida. After successfully interviewing before the Judicial Nominating Commission (JNC) in Broward County, his name was among six forwarded to Governor Jeb Bush for consideration. At the governor's request, Judge Singhal traveled from Fort Lauderdale to Tallahassee for an in-person interview. While Judge Singhal was not nominated at that time, over the next six years, he applied for 16 different judicial vacancies—10 with Governor Charlie Crist—each

Top: Judge Singhal about to start a trail run in Estes Park, Colo., in 2008. Below: Judge Singhal as a baby in 1965.

time being nominated but not appointed. “It’s very true that we are judged in large part by how we handle disappointment and failure,” Judge Singhal said. “In the end, I was interviewed by so many lawyers from Judicial Nominating Commissions and from the Executive Office of the Governor, and maintained friendships with all of them that the sixteen failed applications all proved to be a benefit to me.”

In August 2011, after Judge Singhal completed his 17th application, Governor Rick Scott appointed him to the circuit bench—notably the first judicial vacancy in Broward County during Governor Scott’s tenure. When he received the call from Governor Scott, he assumed his friend Judge Jay Hurley was playing a trick on him. Judge Singhal noted that he will always be grateful to Governor Scott and his general counsel, Charlie Trippe, for their confidence in him. For most of us, the notion of applying and interviewing for the same job 17 times—in the face of constant rejection—seems unfathomable.

Certainly, after his appointment, one would reasonably conclude that Judge Singhal would happily finish his career on the state bench, but he had higher ambitions. Beginning in August 2016, after earning the respect of litigants from varied fields and walks of life, he applied for a vacancy on Florida’s Fourth District Court of Appeal. Just like in years past, the JNC nominated Judge Singhal along with five others to fill this seat. Again, Judge Singhal was named a finalist for the position, and this time, his friend Judge Jeff Kuntz was appointed. Judge Singhal says, “One of the best parts of the application and interview process has always been the great people I have met along the way. I am in touch with Judge Kuntz regularly and I am blessed that he has sent two of his former law clerks—Eric Yesner and Jennifer Helmy—on to clerk with me.”

A little over one year later, in October 2017, Judge Singhal applied to the federal JNC in Miami to fill one of five vacant federal seats in the Southern District of Florida. The federal JNC recommended Judge Singhal—and nine others—to fill the vacancies. In February 2018, after interviewing with Senator Marco Rubio and Senator Bill Nelson, Judge Singhal interviewed with the Office of White House Counsel. Following the interview, President Trump announced his intent to nominate three people, but Judge Singhal’s name was not included on the list.

In October 2018, when three seats became vacant on the Florida Supreme Court, Judge Singhal applied for one of the seats. Unsurprisingly, from a list of 59 applicants, the Florida Supreme Court JNC forwarded Judge Singhal’s name—along with 10 other candidates—to



Governor-elect Ron Desantis. Yet again, Judge Singhal traveled to interview with the governor, and, as in the past, other candidates were appointed.

In April 2019, Judge Singhal’s persistence paid off when he received an email requesting a teleconference with the general counsels to Senator Marco Rubio and Senator Rick Scott. Following his teleconference, he interviewed again with the Office of White House Counsel. On May 1, 2019, Judge Singhal learned that President Trump intended to nominate him to the federal bench. On December 20, 2019, at the age of 56, Judge Singhal became the first Asian-Pacific American Article III judge ever appointed to serve in the Southern District of Florida and within the jurisdiction of the Eleventh Circuit. The confirmation of Judge Singhal is testament to his attitude, hard work, and persistence, and his story serves us all well the next time we encounter any setback.

In addition to the core values Judge Singhal’s parents instilled in him, he was taught to always respect others, the importance of public service, and above all, the cost of freedom. To this point, during jury selection, Judge Singhal routinely shares a personal story of the time his mother received a summons for jury service while undergoing treatment for liver disease.

Judge Singhal admits that he tried to persuade her from serving on a jury simply by letting the court know she was receiving treatment. His mother—who is now deceased—rebuked her son, served on the jury for a three-week trial, and reminded him that jury service was the least she could do in exchange for everything that this country afforded to her and her family. Should



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anyone be fortunate enough to try a case before Judge Singhal, you will almost certainly hear him speak to the venire about the cost of freedom. In exchange for living in the United States—the freest and greatest country

on earth—every citizen, he says, must do two things: (1) pay taxes and, if called upon, (2) serve on a jury. He notes that mandatory military service has not been required since 1973.

Judge Singhal earned his undergraduate degree from Rice University, where he began as a chemical engineering major but left with a degree in political science. Despite his love of sports, he acknowledges his wife is a far better athlete, having played point guard for the varsity basketball team. After graduating from Rice, Judge Singhal attended Wake Forest University School of Law, where he excelled in moot court and won the Edwin M. Stanley and J. Braxton Craven (National Fourth Amendment) competitions.

After graduating from Wake Forest, Judge Singhal moved to South Florida and worked at Fleming, O'Bryan & Fleming. But shortly thereafter, his mother passed away, which led him to reassess his career path and shift his practice to criminal law, becoming a prosecutor for the Office of the State Attorney in Broward County. After working for three years as a prosecutor, he started his own practice, where he dedicated the next 18 years as a criminal defense attorney. During this time, Judge Singhal tried 204 jury trials—including 33 first-degree murders—and approximately 150 non-jury trials.

Judge Singhal was an exceptionally effective trial lawyer. Among the many notable cases he tried is *State of Florida v. Jeffrey Lee Weaver*. The trial court appointed Judge Singhal two months before trial to represent Weaver in the penalty phase for killing a police officer. One week before trial, the court discharged Weaver's guilt-phase counsel, leaving him to represent himself. After the jury convicted Weaver, Judge Singhal presented mitigating evidence and convinced the jury to recommend a life sentence. At the time, it was the first-ever life sentence on a death penalty case tried by State Attorney Michael J. Satz. After the verdict, the court entered an override of the jury's recommendation and sentenced Weaver to death. This was the last time a Florida trial judge ever entered an override of a jury's life recommendation. The Florida Supreme Court unanimously reversed the trial court and imposed a life sentence.

Judge Singhal has received several awards throughout his career, including the Broward County Bar Association (BCBA) Friend of the Bar Award and the BCBA

Stephen R. Booher Award, which recognizes jurists who display humanity, integrity, and dedication to the Bench, Bar, and Community.

Judge Singhal's commitment to community extends outside the courtroom. When he is not on the bench or in chambers, he is very active locally. He is an active member in the FBA, BCBA, St. Thomas More Society of South Florida, Association of Indians in America, National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, and Federalist Society. In addition, he has lectured or appeared on panel discussions in well over 100 educational programs for lawyers, judges, and students.

Judge Singhal is past-president of the Broward Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers and the Stephen R. Booher Chapter of the American Inns of Court. He is also a past member of the board of directors of the BCBA. One of his biggest joys has been his involvement in judicial teaching, at the Florida Judicial College and as Associate Dean of the Florida College of Advanced Judicial Studies. Judge Singhal shares the following:

My family has taught me many things and supported me through numerous ups and downs. My wife and kids are superstars. I am also indebted to some outstanding role models that I met by chance. It's remarkable to have moved to Broward County more than 30 years ago and to see a hugely successful person of my heritage that was so well-respected here and nationally. That person, Dr. Zachariah Zachariah always helped me to achieve my goals. And, of course, my other law clerks—career clerk Patricia Burton and long-term clerk Elaine Carbuccia—make my job much easier. My courtroom deputy clerk Valarie Thompkins makes sure I'm always well-prepared. It's truly the American Dream to be able to raise a family in America, especially seeing the abject poverty my parents left. And my in-laws escaped the tyranny of Communist China some 70 years ago. To be awarded the privilege of having such an incredible job on top of all of that is a blessing and a gift not to be wasted. ☺