Currently a partner with the law firm of Smith, Gambrell & Russell, LLP where she is a member of the law firm’s Business Litigation and Appellate Practices, Justice Sears was the first woman to serve as a Fulton County Superior Court judge. She was also the first woman and the youngest person to ever serve on the Georgia Supreme Court when she was appointed by former Governor Zell Miller in 1992. In retaining her position on the Georgia Supreme Court, Justice Sears also became the first woman to win a contested statewide election in Georgia.

Born in Heidelberg, Germany, Justice Sears spent many of her formative years in Savannah, Georgia. She obtained her Bachelor’s degree from Cornell University and her law degree from Emory University Law School. In 1995, Justice Sears obtained an LLM from the University of Virginia in appellate judicial process. She holds honorary degrees from Spelman, Clark Atlanta, Piedmont, LaGrange and Morehouse, Savannah State Colleges and Universities, as well as John Marshall Law School. Justice Sears began her legal career with the law firm of Alston & Bird but left private practice after five years to begin a career in public service as a judge with the City Court of Atlanta.

Once appointed to the Georgia Supreme Court in 1992, Justice Sears continued her commitment to service to the people and the state. She spearheaded innovative programs such as the Georgia Supreme Court’s Commission on Children, Marriage and Family Law, addressing the legal and administrative issues resulting from the increasing fragmentation of Georgia’s families. Justice Sears was also instrumental in the formation of the Committee on Civil Justice, an organization that develops, coordinates and supports policy initiatives to expand access to the courts for low-income Georgia residents. Justice Sears’ commitment to the law is further exemplified by her role as a past chair of the American Bar Association Board of Elections and the Judicial Section of the Atlanta Bar Association, where she also served as chair of the Minority Clerkship Program. Justice Sears is founder and the first president of the Georgia Association of Black Women Attorneys, an organization serving the needs of Black women attorneys, advocating for women and children, and empowering Georgia’s communities.

Justice Sears was twice on the President’s shortlist for appointment to the United States Supreme Court. She has consistently been on the list of Georgia Super Lawyers, a distinction for Georgia’s pre-eminent attorneys who attain a high degree of peer recognition and professional achievement. Justice Sears is also a Fellow of the prestigious American Academy of Appellate Lawyers, an invitation only organization whose membership is limited to 500 lawyers and is open exclusively to persons “who possesses a reputation of recognized distinction as an appellate lawyer.”

Additionally, Justice Sears contributes her talents in academia. She serves on the Board of Trustees for Emory University, the Carter Center, the Historic Oakland Foundation, and the Cornell University Council. She previously served on the Board of Visitors of Mercer University Law School and the Emory University Law School Council. She has also taught a course on pretrial litigation as an adjunct professor at Emory University Law School and the University of Georgia School of Law. In addition, she was an Advisory Board member of the Albany Law Review and the Honors Program at North Georgia College.

Justice Sears is equally committed to the community at large. She is the founder of the Battered Women’s project in Columbus, Georgia. She has also served on the Board of Directors of such organizations as the Woodruff Arts Center, the Sadie G. Mays Nursing Home and the Georgia Chapter of the National Council of Christians and Jews. In addition, she continues to be actively involved with the Atlanta chapter of the Links, Inc. and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.
A Biography of Leah Ward Sears, entitled “Seizing Serendipity,” was written by Professor Rebecca Davis and was published by The University of Georgia Press, September 2017.

In 2009, Justice Sears retired from the Supreme Court of Georgia after twenty-seven years of service on the bench. Justice Sears is the daughter of Mrs. Onnye Jean Sears and the late Colonel Thomas E. Sears. She is married to Haskell Sears Ward, Senior Vice President of Black Rhino Group. She is also the proud mother of son Addison and daughter Brennan.