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The Honorable Charles Grassley  
Chairman  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein  
Ranking Member  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Nomination of Justice Don Willett to the United States Court of Appeals  
for the Fifth Circuit

Dear Chairman Grassley and Ranking Member Feinstein:

I enthusiastically support Justice Don Willett's nomination to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. I've been privileged to know Justice Willett for roughly two decades. We met in the late 1990s, when he was being recruited to join the board of Austin Community Nursery Schools (ACNS), which I led as Executive Director from 1995-1999.

After nearly five years with this early education and care nonprofit, I have continued to serve vulnerable Texans, leading and gaining support for various nonprofit organizations focused on ending domestic violence, combating homelessness, and improving healthcare.

When I first met Justice Willett, I noted his strong intellect and engaging personality. I was most struck by his dedication to women and children in need. This fit well with the simple mission of ACNS, now rebranded as Mainspring Schools: "To provide accessible, high-quality preschool to Austin's most economically disadvantaged children".

I interacted with dozens of board members during the time I served as executive director of ACNS and other nonprofits. But, Justice Willett will forever be my favorite. His commitment to mission is unparalleled. His personal efforts to ensure its success proved to be both tangible and tireless. For example, he co-chaired ACNS' annual fundraiser, increasing the dollars raised to help ACNS deliver best-in-class preschool to needy families. I wish I could have cloned Justice Willett, or at least bottled his passion.

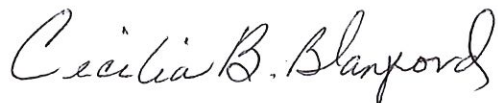
To this day, he is a true believer in quality education and services for underserved children and families. The vulnerable families served by ACNS represent every imaginable background and ethnicity. And Justice Willett understood personally the acute needs of those we served. He spoke with reverence of his mom, who endured every headwind in raising her children, the very same headwinds that many ACNS families face: poverty, low educational attainment, single-parent homes, etc. It's obvious that her example of sacrifice inspired him to support community nonprofits focused on easing the barriers that confronted his own family.

Justice Willett was also an indispensable resource in the wake of federal welfare reform in 1996 and helped me navigate its complex provisions. The law required work in exchange for assistance, thus boosting the need for subsidized child-care services. He was working then for Governor George W. Bush and was a fierce advocate in the Governor's Office for strong state support of quality child care for low-income families and for the working poor trying to sustain employment.

I know that judicial confirmations are rough and tumble. Good people are often unfairly caricatured. All I can do is state without equivocation what enormous compassion Justice Willett has for children in need, particularly their need for accessible, high-quality child care. I know Justice Willett and I have marveled up close at his dedication to vulnerable women and children. It is a dedication born of personal hardship, and it is a dedication proved by deeds, not words.

The federal judiciary needs judges with strong minds, but also with big hearts—judges who never forget that our justice system serves real people. Justice Don Willett is a remarkable judge, but he's an even more remarkable man. America needs him. Contact me anytime if I can help in any way.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cecilia B. Blanford". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Cecilia B. Blanford, MAHS, GPC