Interview with Judge Trudy M. White, Baton Rouge City Court, Div. "B"

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BY ESTEBAN HERRERA JR.

ATB: Please describe your family and educational background.

JTMW: I was born in 1956, and was reared in Baton Rouge. I am the middle child, with an older brother and younger sister. I am a single parent of one 16-year-old adopted daughter named Ashley. My mother, Avis Baker White, is a retired school teacher. My dad, Gilbert A. White, had 50-plus years as a licensed pharmacist before he died.

I attended an all-colored segregated elementary and middle school. In the 9th grade I went to St. Joseph's Academy where I was the only Negro girl in my section, and it was there that I first learned that I was a "minority." I graduated from McKinley, an all-colored high school in 1974. In 1978, I graduated from Howard University in Washington, D.C. with a business management major. In 1981, I graduated from LSU Law Center, and passed the bar that summer. I was elected to the office of Baton Rouge City Court Judge, Division "B" in 1999. It is noteworthy that I am not the first elected official in my family. My great great uncle, Joshua Wilson, served as the state representative for the entire city of Baton Rouge during Reconstruction.

When you asked about educational background, I realized my life experiences have been as much of an education to me as any formal education I have received. I suspect that I am one of few judges across this state who lives in the inner city. I get to see a lot of hopelessness and helplessness that most of my colleagues do not get to see.

Reflecting over the 50 years that I have been on this Earth, I have concluded that I have lived a full life. I am very blessed. It has been an incredible journey for a colored child to become a judge in this city. My grandfather, William Baker, worshipped some of the old time lawyers—Carlos Spaht, Jack Gremillion and Rob Kleinpeter. His favorite attorney was A. Leon Hebert. My grandfather would have been proud of me. He died before I became a lawyer, however.

ATB: Briefly describe your legal career.

JTMW: My first job was a staff attorney for the Department of Revenue and Taxation. I started the Monday after I was "sworn in." For a first generation lawyer, this ceremony was a joyous event for my immediate family. I have a first cousin who is a lawyer, and a first cousin in New York who is a judge.

I worked my way up through the state classified system, as an Attorney 1, Attorney 2, and then Attorney 3 at the Department of Revenue. I was promoted to Chief Attorney to the Child Support Enforcement, and played an integral part in representing the state's interest, with respect to income assignment, which began under my watch. I took a leave of absence and was appointed Assistant Secretary to the Department of Revenue by Governors Edwards and Roemer. I later resigned for an unsuccessful bid for family court judge.

ATB: What has been the high point, and conversely the low point, of your legal career?

JTMW: It is hard for me to pinpoint the high point and the low point, because I am a much better human being after going through events that test my character. However, after my unsuccessful run for family court judge, I was rehired as Deputy General Counsel at the Department of Revenue. Even though I had an unblemished record, no disciplinary actions of any kind, I was unjustly fired by the new secretary. Twenty-three months later I was reinstated to my former job, but resigned.

That was a very difficult time in my life and probably the lowest point in my legal career. I was a political hot potato, and was unemployable. One of the community organizations that I had provided legal services for continued to believe in me. The board hired me as a staff person for the Zion City Community Development Corporation for less than $1000 a month, with no benefits. I had a child in private school. I remember going a whole summer without air conditioning. I liquidated all my assets just to survive. Even though it was 10 years ago, it seems like it was yesterday. During the year and a half I worked for the CDC, we built four houses in an area where there had not been any new construction for more than 50 years. I could not have predicted that this experience would be helpful to me today with my service on the Old South Baton Rouge Partnership Board.

Preston Castille Jr., a partner with Taylor Porter, asked me to be executive director of the Louis A. Martinet Legal Society's Pro Bono Program sometime in 1997. This was a wonderful experience, and the modest increase in pay was like "manna from heaven." I was the receptionist, secretary, law clerk, file clerk, janitor, just everything. It was a humbling experience that I will never forget. I was able to see firsthand the results of my labor in providing legal services to the indigent. In retrospect, I suppose that this was the high point in my career.

After more than a year running the Pro Bono Clinic, some community leaders in the South Baton Rouge area approached me and asked me to consider running for city court judge. Campaigning for judge was the furthest thing from my mind at that time. I had to pray on it. After intense prayer, I had such a great peace and accepted the challenge. I was the underdog in what became a three-man race. Because I had no money and could not raise any money, I had to finance my campaign on credit cards. I still have a significant debt, some seven years after being elected.

ATB: What was your first job and what was the most valuable lesson you learned from it?

JTMW: For black lawyers in 1981, one had two options: open your own law office or work in government. The big law firms were not hiring attorneys who looked like me, and to a lesser extent they were not hiring many women either. The only offer I received was an entry level staff attorney position at the Department of Revenue. I had no real passion for tax law, but I figured that if I could survive LSU Law School, I could learn tax law. When I started law school in 1978, the first day we were told to look to the left and then to the right: two of us would not graduate. And he was right. Two-thirds did not graduate.

Three out of ten blacks in my class graduated—me, Eulis Simien and Mark Delphin. Eulis and Mark helped keep me balanced throughout law school. I learned that you've got to have faith in yourself and others. I have such great faith!

ATB: Have you perceived any major changes in the practice of law since you began practicing?

JTMW: I like to see lawyers asking permission to "approach the bench" or "approach the witness." It seems that the younger lawyers, while not disrespectful, are not as respectful of the process.

ATB: What was most troubling to you about dealing with judges from a lawyer's perspective?

JTMW: Most lawyers fail to do their homework and find out what judges like and dislike. As a young lawyer, I fell prey to that more than once. Let me just say that it was not a pleasant experience for my first significant case to be before Judge William Brown.

ATB: What constitutes a "typical" day for you?

JTMW: As a city court judge, the bulk of our cases are misdemeanor criminal cases, civil cases where the amount in controversy is less than $20,000, and traffic tickets. We also handle evictions, small claims and other miscellaneous proceedings. We do not have a courtroom assigned to us. We rotate each week and that helps with the monotony.

My typical day is likely to be filled with public service outside of the courtroom, and I really would like to digress and share a little about that. I feel that judges should have a spirit of service both in and out of the courtroom. For example, I will be attending the BREC meeting, where they have on the agenda the selection of the new superintendent, and the McKinley Alumni Association meeting. I recently spoke to the high school students at a breakout session for the 100 Black Men's Back-to-School program. I attended the Midnight Basketball program sponsored by the Juvenile Services Department in Eden Park. I will be meeting again with LPB to work on a historical documentary about the first Negro swimming pool in Baton Rouge. I am attending retirement board meetings. These are the kinds of things I do, week after week.

For the last four years I have implemented a Judicial Outreach Program with women inmates from the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, as I embrace my "spirit of service" philosophy. On Nov. 16, 2002, while serving as the guest speaker for the Lifer's Association banquet, I asked Warden Jones if he would allow some of the women to accompany me into the schools in the Baton Rouge area. I recognized that night that I knew very little about what happened to defendants once they were in Department of Corrections' custody. I thought that if the women could share with students their views about prison life and the importance of making good choices in life, it might serve as some deterrence. It has been a phenomenal innovative program. We have presented in over 50 schools thus far, both public and private. My father was a pharmacist at LCIW for eight years, and I have dedicated the program to his memory. It was no coincidence that my father chose to die on the day that I was the guest speaker at the prison.

Another project that I am especially proud of is a historical documentary that we are doing with LPB. In the 1940s, Negro boys were drowning in creeks, lakes, drainage ditches and, of course, the Mississippi River. Through divine intervention, I learned that my grandfather was on the board of the United Negro Recreational Association (UNRA), which was the board that raised the money to purchase the park, which was later donated to BREC. As president of the rechartered Association, we intervened in the lawsuit where the School Board was trying to swap property with BREC. This was the property that was previously donated to BREC by the UNRA in 1953, where there was a reversionary clause in the act of donation. The ancestors would wake me up each morning around 3:30 to direct my path. The predominant themes were "tell the story," "tell our story," "preserve our history," and "remember our mission."

The negotiation process was very emotional for me and my family. School Board Attorney Domoine Rutledge, Troy Charpentier of Kean Miller, and Acting Superintendent Bill Palmer played significant roles in crafting a settlement package together with our lawyer, Chiquita Tate. I believe that the end result is pleasing to the ancestors. In particular, the East Baton Rouge School System agreed to underwrite the filming of the documentary; rooms in the McKinley Middle School would be named after community leaders and educators in the SBR Area; and BREC would allow the United Negro Recreational Association to put monuments around the Brooks Park pool, the oldest public pool in the City. In addition, names of the original and present board members of the Association will be in the foyer of the Auditorium. The documentary should be completed by the end of the Summer 2007.

My heart beams with pride because there are two buildings in the South Baton Rouge area that have my name on them—McKinley Middle Magnet School's Auditorium and McKinley Alumni Center. Both of these buildings are anchors in our community and will serve as the vehicle to education and provide needed services in our community. I am humbled to have played a small role with these two buildings and to be recognized in this way.

ATB: When did you become interested in being a judge?

JTMW: I never aspired to be a judge growing up or while I was in law school, because there were no black judges in Baton Rouge. I only knew two attorneys. One was Walter Dumas and the other was Jim Wayne. Attorney Dumas notarized my bar documents, and Jim Wayne had been a friend of the family. I cannot remember the name of the women's organization that sponsored a rally in Baton Rouge to get women to run for political offices, but they inspired me and planted the seed that I could do it. Most of my private practice was family law, and I had a wealth of experience as Chief Attorney to the Child Support Program, so it was a natural for me to seek the family court seat. I started too late with getting commitments and lost to (Judge) Luke LaVergne.

ATB: What is your judicial philosophy?

JTMW: I pride myself with being courteous, respectful and civil to lawyers, parties, witnesses and staff. I am punctual in convening court, and I decide matters presented for decision promptly. I work hard at getting the business of Division "B" processed in a timely fashion.

ATB: What do you find most rewarding about being a judge?

JTMW: What is most rewarding to me is my unique ability to serve as a positive role model for children. I enjoy going into schools to influence children in a positive manner. I am always doing something in the community with one organization or another.

Children fantasize about cars. So, when I heard this rap song about drug dealers owning Escalades, it was the extra incentive I needed to purchase the car. I wanted to demonstrate to children that one can own the car of your dreams by working hard and serving your community. In my neighborhood, a lot of people sit on the porch and stand on street corners. When I drive down the street, I find myself waving just like I am in a parade.

I am probably more accessible than the average judge. My telephone number is listed, and I do not screen my calls. Many people assume that I am not listed, so they call my mother. My mom knows that I cannot give legal advice so she tries to deflect as many calls as she can. My mom usually advises the callers that she got her law degree from *Oprah*, but if they want to talk she will listen. Usually, they just want to vent.

I admire Judge Bob Downing's "servant-leader" type of spirit and the many programs he has started to help people. I have tried my best to emulate him. We fellowship on a regular basis in our weekly downtown Toastmasters meeting. If I can garner enough support, I would like to implement a literacy program at the Baton Rouge City Court where offenders could be sentenced to working toward their GED.

ATB: What has been your most rewarding experience as a judge?

JTMW: What comes to mind as one of my most rewarding experiences is being asked to share my Judicial Outreach Program at Summer School for Judges a couple of years ago. It was a high honor just to be on a panel with Chief Justice Calogero, Justice Bernette Johnson and Justice Weimer.

ATB: What kind of cases do you find the most difficult to decide?

JTMW: The kind of cases that are the most difficult for me are the "principle of the thing" type. These are the cases that are filed by a litigant because they want to get back at someone. It usually is not about the money. Recently, I had one of these cases where the amount in dispute was less than $100. At one point, I just wanted to go into my pocket and give the person the money.

ATB: Since you have been on the bench, what has been the most interesting case you have heard?

JTMW: The most interesting case I have presided over was a DWI case involving an elected official. This case lasted until two in the morning. It was outstanding lawyering on the part of Assistant City Prosecutor Lisa Freeman and defense attorney Glen Delatte.

ATB: How would you like to be remembered years after you leave the bench?

JTMW: I would like to be remembered as a judge who made tough decisions with compassion and fairness. I am already referred to as the people's judge for all I do in the community. I prefer being called "Judge Trudy" as opposed to Judge White.

Judge Darrell White left a tremendous legacy at City Court. When I first started my tenure at City Court, and folks would say Judge White, they were almost always referring to Judge Darrell White. My dad campaigned for Judge Darrell White. He had a lot of respect for him and so do I.

ATB: What advice would you offer to a young lawyer when appearing before you for the first time?

JTMW: I would advise a young lawyer or a lawyer that does limited practice in City Court to consider asking for a "side bar," if it is necessary.

ATB: What types of activities do you do as a hobby or for fun?

JTMW: I enjoy playing cards. I love to dance. I have two regrets in life, though. One is not being a Dancing Doll for Southern University. The other is not being a blackjack dealer.

ATB: Is there anything I have not asked that you would like to address?

JTMW: Yes. In doing research for the historical documentary, I learned so much about myself, my family, my community and the City of Baton Rouge. You see, it was civil rights lawyers such as Johnnie Jones Sr., A. P. Tureau, Alex L. Pitcher Jr. and Murphy Bell Sr. who sacrificed so much so that Negroes could secure certain fundamental rights in Baton Rouge. I have a copy of the petition filed in *Davis v. EBRP School Board*. This case was filed in 1956, the year I was born. Some have referred to *Davis* as the longest desegregation lawsuit in the nation. I did not know that Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall was one of the original lawyers representing the plaintiffs until I saw the pleadings. I gained a lot of respect for the late Councilwoman Pearl George from my research. I did not realize that she integrated City Court and led the attempt to integrate City Park Pool in 1965. It is referred to as the "attempted swim-in." I also did not know about the "hangings" in the City Court building where I work each day, until I read newspaper articles. These hangings continued into the 1940s.

The other thing is that I support the election of judges. It is likely that I would not have been on the short list for consideration for an appointment under a merit selection process. I am comfortable placing my destiny in the hands of the voters.

Lastly, I truly believe that to whom much is given, much is required.