



Justice Fern Fisher

Justice Fern Fisher Assumes New Role at Unified Court System

Recently appointed to the post of Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for the Courts in New York City, Fern Fisher now also serves as Director of the New York State Courts Access to Justice Program, whose mission is to ensure access to justice in civil and criminal matters for New Yorkers of all incomes, backgrounds and special needs.

Justice Fisher began her law career as a legal services attorney practicing in New York City Civil Court's Housing Part in Manhattan, subsequently serving as Deputy Director of Harlem Legal Services, Inc. and then as an assistant attorney general for the New York State Department of Law. She also provided pro bono legal services to community organizations as a project director for the National Conference of Black Lawyers prior to her first judicial appointment in 1989 to the New York City Civil Court's Housing Part. Later elected to the New York City Civil Court and then to the state's Supreme Court,

she was named Administrative Judge of the Civil Court in 1996, serving in this capacity until March 2009. Justice Fisher shared with us some of her career highlights and personal insights for this cover story.

Raised by a single mother, Justice Fisher at a very young age was keenly aware of the day-to-day struggles of indigent families, which drew her to a career in public service. During her senior year at Howard University, she taught in the Washington, D.C. public schools, applying to law school at the urging of both a Howard University history professor and the professor in charge of the school's political science club, each of whom admired her strong work ethic and earnest desire to serve others. Viewing the law as a vehicle for positive change, Justice Fisher took their advice, graduating from Harvard Law School in 1978.

Asked about her most memorable career experiences to date, Justice Fisher fondly recalls her early days as a legal services attorney in the Housing Part. Other high points include her role as a Housing Part judge in suggesting the clerk's triplicate answer form that she later implemented as the Administrative Judge and has since helped countless litigants to raise viable defenses in non-payment proceedings.

While this affable jurist has long been a highly skilled multitasker, lately she's thought about purchasing a pair of roller skates just to help her get from place to place as she wears the multiple hats of overseer of all the New York City courts, the state's Access to Justice Program and the central authority for the New York City Civil Courts, New York City Criminal Court and the three Community Courts.

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An Historic Milestone



**Hon. Sonia Sotomayor,
first Hispanic Justice appointed to the
United States Supreme Court**

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After Decades Spent Fighting Bias, Judge Passes Torch

There was a marked absence of minority judges on the New York State bench when jurist Lewis Douglass first took the helm at the state's Judicial Commission on Minorities in the early 1990s. Today, minorities comprise 16 percent of the state bench, a feat largely attributed to the Commission's tireless advocacy under the able watch of the now-retired Kings County Supreme Court justice, who after 17 years as the Commission's chair is stepping down.

Initially established to undertake a comprehensive review of the treatment of minorities within the legal system, the Commission became a permanent entity in 1991, dedicated to promoting racial equity and cultural sensitivity in the courts and legal profession via public outreach programs and other initiatives.

At a May reception honoring Judge Douglass' successful tenure as head of the Commission, Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman lauded the retired jurist's art of gentle persuasion and keen ability to bring people together.

"Lewis Douglass' leadership and absolute commitment made the Commission a true partner in so many important accomplishments. When something was wrong, he would not stop until it was made right," said Judge Lippman, citing the Commission's role in increasing the courts' job pool of minority candidates as well as its efforts to make jury pools more representative and focus on strategies to reduce the disproportionate number of young people of color in our criminal justice and foster care systems.

Following a standing ovation, Judge Douglass, an affable, soft-spoken man, talked of the strides made since the 1963



Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman with honoree Lewis Douglass as Judge Rose H. Sconiers, incoming chair of the Judicial Commission on Minorities, applauds her predecessor's many accomplishments over his 17-year tenure.



Hon. Lewis L. Douglass and his daughter Lori Anne Douglass.



Joyce Y. Hartsfield, Hon. Sharon S. Townsend, Hon. Rose H. Sconiers



Hon. Priscilla L. Hall, Hon. Betty J. Williams, Pamela Hayes.



Hon. Juanita Bing Newton, Surrogate Troy K. Webber

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CERVANTES SOCIETY HONORS LUIS A. GONZALEZ

On June 2, 2009, The Cervantes Society honored the Honorable Luis A. Gonzalez upon his promotion to Presiding Justice of the Appellate Division, First Department. Justice Gonzalez's historic appointment as the first Hispanic to hold this position was noted by all in attendance.



Jonathan Hartsfield, Hon. Luis A. Gonzalez,
Joyce Y. Hartsfield



George Wade, Pamela Hayes,
Hon. Latia W. Martin, Joyce Y. Hartsfield

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March on Washington, vividly recounting the history-making event, which he and his then three-year-old son witnessed firsthand.

“Then I fast-forward to a phone call from my daughter—who’s waiting in 20-degree weather for Barack Obama’s inauguration,” he added proudly, at the same time cautioning attendees not to become complacent in the ongoing fight to eliminate racial and ethnic bias.

Eighth Judicial District Supreme Court Justice Rose Sconiers succeeds Judge Douglass as chair of the Commission.



Thomas Bess, Joyce Y. Hartsfield, Ross Upshaw

Visit the Judicial Commission on Minorities online at: www.nycourts.gov/ip/minorities/index.shtml.

Building Bridges to Justice

21st Annual Meeting of the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts

On May 6 - 9, 2009 the Pennsylvania Interbranch Commission for Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Fairness and the Allegheny County Bar Association hosted the 21st annual meeting of the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts (“NCREFC”). The meeting was held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at the Omni William Penn Hotel. The annual meeting of the NCREFC involves state Commissions from around the country coming



Juan Williams with Board Members of NCREFC.

together to exchange information and attend seminars on race and ethnic issues in the courts. The Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities represented the New York



Gene Harris, Diversity Coordinator (Allegheny County Bar Association), Justice yvonne lewis, Kings County Supreme Court, Tracy Pardo, Chief Clerk, Bronx Supreme Court (Civil)

Unified Court System and shared the programs and successes of the previous year along with the other state representatives.

This year, the NCREFC featured breakout sessions on timely topics such as: “What is “Implicit Bias” and How Does it Affect Decision-Making in our Justice System?”; “Fostering Diversity in Law Firms, Corporations and Government” and “When Race and Gender Intersect; The Double Bind for Women of Color”. The session on Implicit Bias examined how we automatically process information and how it relates to issues of color. Dr. Shwan C. Marsh presented materials that showed that over time, we learn to associate certain characteristics with certain categories of information. In contrast to explicit bias, implicit bias operates outside of awareness.

Dr. Marsh discussed specific strategies to process information differently and counteract the influence of stereotypes. Some of the strategies include “exposure-spending time with out-groups” and having “prompts” to



Juan Williams, Noted Author, Commentator and Senior Correspondent, National Public Radio, Joyce Y. Hartsfield, Executive Director, Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities



Pictured from left to right: Alice Chapman-Minutello, Special Assistant to Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for NYC Courts; Tracy Pardo, Chief Clerk Civil Division, Bronx Supreme Court; Judge yvonne lewis, Kings County Supreme Court; Judge Clarence J. Jones, Connecticut Superior Court; Justice Rose H. Sconiers, Chair, Franklin H. Williams Commission on Minorities; Joyce Y. Hartsfield

encourage thinking about the decisions that we make.

The panel on “Fostering Diversity in Law Firms, Corporations and



Hon. Rose H. Sconiers with Hon. James Graves.

Government”, focused on the benefits of diversity including “ how it fosters

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Christopher Hill, Esq., ACLU Capital Punishment Project, Hon. Michael Douglas, Supreme Court of Nevada, Justice Edward C. Clifton, Board Member

Pearl Hampton Recognized For Her Contribution to Diversity in the Courts

On June 24th, 2009, the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities recognized Pearl Hampton for her years of contribution to the Black History Month programs presented in New York County Supreme Court. The programs presented included the Dance Theatre of Harlem and Future Leaders Achievement Awards Program. The award was presented as part of the New York Legal Education Opportunity reception at the New York County Lawyers' Association.

The Dance Theatre of Harlem Program showcased classical ballet performances by professional and student performers from the Dance Theatre of Harlem. The Dance Theatre of Harlem was the first dance company to perform in the Rotunda. The first program was held in 2006 and continued through 2009. It is sponsored by Dance Theatre of Harlem, Supreme Court, Civil Branch; and the office of the New York County Clerk.

The Future Leaders' Achievement Award Program presented awards to high school students in recognition of their academic and social achievements. The program was initiated as the first event commemorating Black History Month by the Civil Division of the Supreme Court, New York County. The honored students were recognized by current role models of color from the community. The role models presenting the awards represented leadership in the selected disciplines of the winning students. The first program was held in 1999 and continued through 2007.

Ms. Hampton is the Deputy County Clerk and is responsible for implementing policies and procedures relative to jury management in New York county. We salute Pearl Hampton as a gem of the court system.



William Etheridge, Hon. Rose H. Sconiers, Pearl Hampton, Hon. Fern Fisher, Hon. yvonne lewis

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public confidence in the justice system, improves decision-making by incorporating different opinions and experiences into the process, and generally improves professionalism within the legal and business institutions. The panelists spoke of the

importance of management or partners going outside of their comfort zones and increasing the opportunities and work challenges that an associate needs to grow. The panelists also focused on viewing diversity as a return on investment, and how to

measure that benefit effectively. The session on "When Race and Gender Intersect; The Double Bind for Women of Color" focused on the special status of women of color and their treatment in our society.

Eighth Judicial District Promotes New York State Court Officer Civil Service Exam

The Eighth Judicial District, under the auspices of Administrative Judge Sharon Townsend and Supreme Court Justice Rose H. Sconiers, Chair of the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities, together with the Honorable Byron Brown, Mayor of the City of Buffalo and Chief Jewel Williams, Department of Public



Hon. Sharon Townsend (extreme right), Chief Jewel Williams (at podium), Mayor of Buffalo New York, Byron Brown

Safety, New York State Office of Court Administration, sponsored a “Mobile Unit Recruitment Event” at Niagara Square in downtown Buffalo on Thursday, July 9, 2009. This collaboration between the Unified Court System and the City of Buffalo was undertaken to help recruit qualified candidates interested in taking the Court Officer-Trainee Civil Service Examination. The event helped provide information to the public about careers in law enforcement available to New York residents who reflect the diversity of communities throughout the state. Court Officers in attendance provided information, answered questions, shared experiences, offered applications, and spoke about employment opportunities in the courts.

Court Officer Examination Outreach

On July 17, 2009, Justice Doris Ling-Cohan, a member of the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities, encouraged the Asian Pacific American community to take advantage of the NYS Supreme Court’s Court Officer Examination. Justice Ling-Cohan, the first Asian Pacific American woman elected to the Supreme Court, stated, “The Asian-American community is encouraged to apply to become Court Officers so the court system can be more representative of the population it serves.” City Council Member John Liu, the first Asian Pacific American elected to legislative office in New York, stated, “It is imperative to increase Asian Pacific American representation throughout all levels of government, especially in our judicial system in New York City.” Captain Sam Lam and Sergeant Barry Gong described their career experiences as extremely fulfilling.



Captain Sam Lam and Justice Doris Ling-Cohan, New York County Supreme Court

Commission Welcomes the 3rd Year of New York LEO Students

The New York Legal Education Opportunity Program (“NY LEO”) is in its third year of preparing college graduates for the challenges of the first year of law school. On June 24, 2009, the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities with the New York State Judicial Institute and the New York County Lawyers’ Association hosted a reception for the nineteen students who are this years participants. The reception was held at the New York County Lawyers’ Association.

The NY LEO program prepares disadvantaged and or low income college graduates for their first year of law school with an intensive six-week summer program held at the New York State Judicial Institute in White Plains. The judges, attorneys and court personnel in attendance encouraged the students to stay focused during their first year of law school. In an effort to offer further support, the students are linked with judges and attorneys as mentors for their first year. The students will attend law schools throughout New York State.



Hon. Alvin Yearwood and NY LEO Students.



NY LEO Students



Anthony Ricco and NY LEO Students.



William Etheridge, Chief Clerk, Criminal Courts, New York City and NY LEO Students

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With regard to her latter role, the jurist says that diversity on the bench and non-judicial workforce is integral to promoting public confidence in the courts and enhancing access to justice. “Courts today must be equipped to accommodate the diverse cultures and special needs of the community. It is crucial for litigants to believe that they will receive a fair hearing in court—a belief that is affirmed when they see diversity at the courthouse,” she emphasizes.

Having played the part of mentor to many a young person over the course of her distinguished career, Justice Fisher tells those interested in pursuing the law that while diligence is the key to success, giving back to the community is the key to personal fulfillment. Sage advice, indeed, from this dedicated public servant and mother of two, her son, Sean, an attorney with the National Basketball Players Association, and her daughter, Ashley, a recent graduate of Boston College.

The Franklin H. Williams Commission on Minorities invites you to join us on Tuesday, September 29, 2009 at 5:30 p.m. for a reception in the New York County Supreme Court rotunda (60 Centre Street, Manhattan) honoring Justice Fern Fisher. For more information about this event, kindly contact The Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities at 212-428-2790.

Fall 2009

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