

This Black History Month, AOC leadership would like to spotlight some of the Black voices who are helping to create a judicial branch that reflects the diverse communities around us, one where everyone can feel seen, heard, valued, and empowered to succeed.

We hope you'll join us in celebrating the many contributions the Black community has made improving the administration of justice.

-Brittany Gregory, Associate Director of Judicial and Legislative Relations



Natasha Johnson, AOC Legal Services Senior Analyst

What advice would you give to young Black professionals who are looking to work in the judicial branch?

One of the hardest things will be to listen to your colleagues voice hurtful opinions about your community, but it's not your job to prove them wrong or teach them differently. Your job is to show up and give your best for that day; and your "best" will vary from day to day because that's life. Work to do so without giving into the pressure to represent the entire Black community; it will serve you well in being less stressed and quickly burned out. Also, recognize that you're getting to see "how the hot dog is made". Take this journey one day at a time, and try to manage your expectations as best you can.



Othniel Palomino, Chief Administrative Officer, King County District Court

What accomplishment are you most proud of?

I am proud to have led King County District Court in engaging more with the diverse communities we serve, and establishing a forum for judges and staff to have productive conversations on diversity, equity and inclusion. These efforts grew out of our participation in the 2015 Cine en el Parque event in White Center, where judges and staff experienced how much it matters to people for the Court to engage them where they live and work. I also am proud that we have formalized our long-term commitment to DEI principles via a DEI Committee established under our Local Rules.



Chief Judge Lori Smith, Washington State Court of Appeals, Division 1

How important is representation to you in the courts and community?

Representation is everything. All human beings want to know that they are seen and heard. The court system serves the community and in order for that community to have faith in it, it must reflect all who it serves. Representation gives the community a sense of recognition, inclusion, and belonging that evokes confidence in the court system and the belief that it will treat them fairly. It also helps to eliminate stereotypes held by those working in the court. Representation is one of the steps necessary for equity.



Frank Thomas, AOC Sr. Court Program Analyst, staff for the Minority and Justice Commission

What inspired you to work for the courts?

I have always been fascinated with the role of the legal system in uplifting or creating obstacles in people's lives, so it is a dream come true to be able to work alongside judicial officers and other professionals dedicated to making the courts a more useful tool for all people.



Trish Kinlow, DMCMA President, Judicial Branch Administrator for the Tukwila Municipal Court

What advice would you give to young Black professionals who are looking to work in the judicial branch?

The judicial system is not perfect because it is run by imperfect people who make decisions on and uphold imperfect laws that were based on racism, bias and with a purpose of excluding people who look like you. And when you come into this imperfect system, you must be willing to do the work to make improvements in each and every way that you can. You must be willing to accept that you may be the "only one" in your entire courthouse and have the courage, wisdom, strength and tenacity to keep fighting to fix a broken system. I would tell a young Black professional that you must exercise your innate ability to read a room, and then make sure you position yourself so that when an opportunity comes for you to make a contribution towards improving the system, you are prepared because you don't want to miss the invitation to be in the "Room where it happens."



G. Helen Whitener, Supreme Court Justice

What accomplishment are you most proud of?

I am proud of having achieved the dream of sitting on the state's highest court, but I am most proud of the message it sends to other Black individuals. We are capable of achieving great things only if given an opportunity. This is why I believe in mentoring others, because it is wonderful that I am the first in many things in the legal field, but I do not want to be the last.



Judge Karl Williams, President-elect for DMCJA, Pierce County District Court Position 6

How important is representation to you in the courts and community?

I can't emphasize enough how important representation is to the court and community. The disproportionate numbers of people of color who are represented in our courts as criminal defendants is very concerning to me. It is my belief that systematic racism is a significant contributor to this problem. Representation is a necessary step in addressing systematic racism. By increasing the numbers of people of color in the courts and in community leadership positions, we give our community the understanding that these positions are obtainable. Representation by people of color in the courts, specifically judicial officers, incorporates a prospective that expands the understanding of some of the underlying causes of the behaviors that may lead to criminal charges. Representation is also an effective means of guarding against unconscious bias that may lead to harsher punishments and more restrictive conditions of release for people of color. It is my contention that it is the obligation of every person of color to increase representation in the courts and in the leadership of their community. You do so by encouraging and mentoring individuals to take on these vital roles.