

Diversity Committee "Pathways to the Bench" Program – April 2017 - Portland, OR

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On April 4, 2017, in conjunction with the Spring FMJA Conference, the FMJA Diversity Committee sponsored a lunchtime "Pathways to the Bench" symposium at the Portland Federal Courthouse. The program was co-sponsored by the Portland FBA. Members of the local bar and judges, including many Magistrate Judges from around the country, attended. FMJA Diversity Committee Chair, Hon. Michael Seng, of the Eastern District of California, opened the program and introduced the participants.

The program featured four local Magistrate Judges of diverse backgrounds interviewing four diverse Magistrate Judges from around the country on their backgrounds, experiences, and different pathways to the bench. The interviewees also discussed the importance of diversity on the bench and their lives as Magistrate Judges. Attendees from the bar gained valuable insight about the process of becoming a Magistrate Judge and steps they could take to increase their opportunities to serve on the bench.

Before the interviews started, the group heard from Carol Pratt, Ph.D., Esq., who served as the chair of the most recent Magistrate Selection Panel in Portland. Carol provided a great outline on the job qualifications, the steps her committee went through to choose the top five candidates to send to the District's Board of Judges, and she gave valuable tips on how to make an applicant's resume stand out. She indicated that the cover letter is the chance to really shine and tell the committee more about yourself beyond what's on your resume and application. Her committee ultimately presented a list of five qualified women to the District of Oregon Board of Judges.

Hon. John V. Acosta conducted the first interview of Hon. Guillermo R. Garcia of the Southern District of Texas. Judge Garcia's tips included getting involved early with the local bar and becoming familiar with the courts where you want to practice and potentially join the bench. He said to give honest answers from the heart when you are interviewed by the selection committee. He sits in Laredo, Texas which is a small community with a local bar made up of diverse practitioners. In addition to working hard and persisting, he reminded the audience that how you interact with other lawyers throughout your career will be reviewed in the selection process. His caseload involves many drug and border cases. As a child he traveled to Mexico to visit with family all the time, and he believes his interaction with people from Mexico when he was young shaped his understanding of the people who often come before him and their problems.

Hon. Stacie F. Beckerman, one of the top five women from Carol Pratt's selection committee, interviewed the Hon. George W. Cannon, Jr., Magistrate Judge of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Judge Cannon spoke of his youth growing up in Mississippi where his life was shaped by "separate but equal" problems of the day. He was involved in the civil rights movement, and said his background "coming from the street" and his faith helps shape his work as a judge. He became a lawyer to overcome his fear of the law. Being a judge allows him to use his experience as a litigator. His tips for paving the way to the bench included getting involved in your community, be humble, speak the truth, and watch your lifestyle. The background check is extensive and you need to get rid of bad habits if you want to be a judge.

Hon. Jolie Ann Russo interviewed the Hon. Donna M. Ryu who indicated she is the first gay judge in the Northern District of California. She noted that of the 32 judges in her district, 50% are women and 41% are judges of color. The chief judges of her district have all been non-white males since 1991, thus illustrating how changes at the top are critical to feed the entryway to the pipeline. Diversity on the bench leads to diversity on the selection committee which leads to more diversity on the bench. Her tips for lawyers interested in becoming a judge included having a good temperament and reputation, practicing with respect and professionalism, and "sowing the seeds" all along the way in your career. Judge Ryu believes diversity on the bench is critical to the fair administration of justice. Judges serve the public and

bring their whole selves to the job. The bench should reflect the public it serves because the perception of the public in how and who dispenses justice is critical to the success of the courts. She paraphrased Chief Justice Rehnquist who indicated that a court that is diverse can see the world from the viewpoint of those before them.

Lastly, the Hon. Youlee Yim You interviewed Judge Jay C. Gandhi, the first South Asian Federal Judge in California. Both Judge You and Judge Gandhi are children of immigrant parents. Judge Gandhi's tips for aspiring Magistrate Judges included the importance of getting to know the judges. He said practitioners need to get in front of the judge, and even get a judge to provide you with mentoring. While the selection is merit based, he noted the reality of politics entering into the process. It is important to have a "champion" for you on the selection panel if possible. He agreed that reputation is critical to being selected. In reflecting on how diversity affects what he does, he noted that he speaks different languages and grew up in two different worlds with his immigrant parents. "Immigrants are good at adapting," he said. His ability to move among different worlds has made him adept at shaping different worlds from the bench. He comes from a business background, and noted that educational and practice diversity is also critical to the success of any bench.

All in all, the program was very well received and the format of intimate interviews enabled the participants to tell their stories in a relaxed atmosphere reminiscent of "Between Two Ferns." The personalities and styles of the interviewer judges and interviewee judges came through clearly and it would have been easy to listen to the judges all day. Audience members could easily understand why they all were selected to serve as magistrate judges, and the lawyers and litigants who come before their respective courts are better served for their presence there.

The FMJA Diversity Committee sends a huge shout out thank you to our hosts and interviewers from the Oregon Magistrate Judges bench, and especially Magistrate Judge John Acosta who led the organizing committee for the program.

The FMJA Diversity Committee can always use new members. Let us know if you are interested in applying to serve on the committee. We also encourage all magistrate judges to promote diversity in their courts. If you are attending the summer conference and annual meeting in Chicago, please watch for details of another program of the Diversity Committee to be presented in conjunction with that conference. We hope you will attend.