

EXAMINER PROFILE: Anita M. Josey-Herring, D.C. Superior Court judge

Keeping it all in the family

BY BILL MYERS
Examiner Staff Writer

Many Washingtonians haven't heard of D.C. Superior Court Judge Anita M. Josey-Herring, but they owe her a debt of gratitude for helping keep the District's streets safe.

Now in her ninth year on the bench, Josey-Herring, 45, has been instrumental in reforming the Superior Court's Family Court to focus on reducing juvenile crime and recidivism. She was a key actor in putting together D.C.'s highly regarded Family Treatment Court program, which allows mothers charged with neglect to have their children stay with them while they undergo intensive rehabilitation in clinics. The program has helped hundreds of women kick their drug habits and keep their children out of foster care — and quite possibly out of the criminal justice system.

At the beginning of the month, Josey-Herring took over as presiding judge of Family Court. She sat down with *The Examiner* to discuss her legal career and her plans for continued reforms at Family Court.

Q: Why did you want to be a lawyer?

A: Well, when I was an undergraduate [at Virginia Commonwealth University] ... I was contemplating what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I majored in political science and it was a quite intriguing area. ... It really exposed me more to how the various branches of government interface and how important it is to have a judicial branch of government that was sound and protective of individual liberties and rights. And I later, as a result of participating in various forums and classes at the university, became interested in individual rights — in particular because of a class that I had involving the Holocaust. And studying about the atrocities ... I thought that I might be interested in doing something essentially to enhance the ability of people to live in a fair justice system and to respond to their basic needs.

Q: Are you glad you became a lawyer?

A: Yes. Being a litigator in particular was one of the most grueling but fun experiences of my life. It's an interesting thing to take your legal knowledge on a theoretical base and have that transformed on a practical level. I was very comfortable after a while appearing in court and trying cases, and I just think it added to my skill set to be able to litigate cases. It was an exciting time. I had a variety of cases at the Public Defender Service, starting out with representing juveniles. I argued appeals before the D.C. Court of Appeals about a year, and then I went on to handle



Jay Westcott/Examiner

D.C. Superior Court Judge Anita M. Josey-Herring was one of the primary players behind Washington's well-regarded Family Treatment Court program.

ANITA'S FAVORITES

- **Restaurant:** Ortanique
- **Fast-food joint:** Ollie's Trolley
- **Book:** "Their Eyes Were Watching God" by Zora Neale Hurston
- **Movie:** "The Great Gatsby"
- **Play:** "Les Miserables," "Phantom of the Opera," "Cats"
- **Vacation spot:** Mexico
- **Actor:** Denzel Washington
- **Actress:** Cicely Tyson
- **Role model:** Oprah Winfrey
- **Hobby:** Vintage shopping

felonies and ultimately homicide cases. And I really have to say it was my most rewarding work.

Q: What are you most proud of from your time at the PDS?

A: I am most proud of the experience that I got from the agency. It has really held me in good stead. It has been very handy in all sorts of circumstances. I was well-trained there. The Public Defender Service focused heavily on training lawyers, and that enabled me to be a very confident litigator and negotiator.

Q: Any particular cases that stand out?

A: I had a number of cases. I recall particularly working in a double homicide case. ... I also remem-

ber distinctly another case that I tried where I represented one of four or more defendants who were charged with conspiracy. And that conspiracy involved several homicides and a number of other crimes. Those crimes were very challenging legally and factually.

Q: Did you know when you went to law school that you wanted to be a judge?

A: I actually thought, believe it or not, that I wanted to be an anchorperson. And over time, I decided that I was not going to pursue that. I didn't quite know how to get started. I took a stab at talking with a few people and I got really discouraged because I just didn't feel I was dealing with really professional people. Ultimately, after leaving Georgetown [University], I clerked for [D.C. Superior Court] Judge [Herbert B.] Dixon. And he was a very good role model for me. He's very professional, he's very well-organized, he has very high expectations. I thereafter took a special liking to a judge who I thought was just outstanding when I was at the Public Defender Service. [U.S. District] Judge [Henry H.] Kennedy is in my view the quintessential jurist. I respected him so much for his intellect, for his patience, for his concern. ... He had a great demeanor

and persona that I thought would be great to emulate ...

Q: So at what stage did you decide you wanted to be a judge?

A: I guess you could say I never excluded it ... although it wasn't my main goal until I was the deputy director of the Public Defender Service. I decided that I did not want to continue at the agency to be the director. Our director was going to be leaving about a year later and I decided that should start figuring out what I really wanted to do next. And I had a lot of conversations with some people who I really respect ... and decided to put my name in as a judge. I thought I could do a good job. I thought I could make a difference in a different context.

Q: Are you glad you did it?

A: It's been a great job. It is a very important job. And I really seriously consider all of the decisions that I make and I feel a responsibility to do that. But I think I'm making a positive contribution to the justice system.

Q: What one thing did you value most?

A: The fact that I helped develop the Family Treatment Court program, because I can actually see the positive impact that it has

on children and parents who are broken. I think it's working. It's really been more successful than any of us who were involved in the effort initially really could have imagined.

Q: Are you looking forward to becoming presiding judge?

A: Absolutely. It's a natural transition for me. It will give me the opportunity to implement further some of the things that I had already that I had already been working on as a deputy presiding judge. I really look forward to getting back to juvenile justice. It's a key area for us to focus on ... seeing the system from the eyes of the child involved in the case and not just dealing with the legalistic issues ... I think we have an opportunity to positively reduce recidivism by focusing on some of the core issues involving what brings the juvenile into the court system in the first place. I think we have to look deeper than that to focus on what is happening in their home environment, what are their educational issues, what is the state of their mental health. And I also think it's important for us to require the juveniles coming into our system to participate in a significant amount of community service to really account for the harm that they're causing citizens.