

Lee Satterfield Installed as the District's Superior Court Chief Judge

By Talib I. Karim, Esq.
WI Contributing Writer

Washington native Lee Satterfield was sworn-in as the Superior Court's fifth Chief Judge on Sept. 24, after a spirited race for the office. The seven-member Judicial Nomination Commission chose the more experienced Satterfield over fellow nominee, Superior Court Judge Anita Josey-Herring.

"He's not one of these people who have been in the limelight. In a very quiet way, he's been a leader implementing change without a lot of glitz and fan fare," said Superior Court Associate Judge Maurice Ross, who spoke before an audience of lawyers and judges at the City Club of Washington. The group was assembled by the men of Sigma Delta Tau Legal Fraternity, the nation's oldest historically African American legal fraternity.

Satterfield has been on the bench for 16 years, five more than Josey-Herring, and was the first presiding judge of the District's Family Court. Satterfield was responsible for establishing policy and systems for the current key Superior Court docket.

Judge Satterfield's late father, also named Lee Satterfield, was a well-respected figure in the African American legal community. Known as "Big Lee," the senior Satterfield served as the General Counsel of C&P Telephone (predecessor to Verizon). During his career, the Chief Judge's father led many groups, including the board of trustees for the Public Defender Service, the Committee on Admissions for the D.C. Court of Appeals, and the D.C. Service Corps. At the Sigma Delta Tau reception, Satterfield paid tribute to his father.

"He was responsible for me going to law school," Satterfield said.

Courtesy Photo



▲ Superior Court Chief Judge Lee Satterfield.

Satterfield succeeds retiring Judge Rufus King, who served two four-year terms that ended on Sept. 30. Facing Judge Satterfield is a daunting task: the job of transforming the District's sole trial court.

"He has to take this from a 1970's court to a 21st century court," said Judge Ross. "We are in many ways stuck in the past. Our physical plant is old, our technology is old, as is our processes and systems. Notwithstanding the improvements made under Judge King and prior administrations, we are really two generations behind."

To make these changes, the new Chief Judge will have to become a master in both administration and diplomacy. Satterfield will have to manage a \$98 million budget and 900 full-time employees, including 58 judges. Since the Superior Court, together with the

District Court of Appeals, is federally funded, Satterfield also has to contend with multiple layers of approval.

According to the Superior Court Web site, the Court's budget requires sign-off by the Office of Management and Budget, the White House, and the U.S. Congress in addition to the Mayor and the D.C. City Council.

Prior to his appointment as a judge, Satterfield was a trial attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice, where he prosecuted organized crime and racketeering cases. Prior to that, Satterfield spent a number of years in private practice representing clients in both civil and criminal cases. He also worked as an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia, prosecuting homicide and sex offense cases.

Judge Satterfield graduated from St. John's College High School in 1976, and attended the University of Maryland. He earned his law degree from George Washington University, then landed a post as a judicial law clerk to former Associate Superior Court Judge Paul R. Webber, III, where he would eventually become the court's top judge.

Richard Wilson, Sigma Delta Tau Chief Judge, said the organization seeks to provide similar grooming to aspiring lawyers newly minted lawyers.

"We try to capture young attorneys and law students to impress upon them the need to do right thing," said Wilson, whose group has been in existence for 74 years.

Satterfield expressed his hope for working with Sigma Delta Tau and other groups to make the Superior Court a world-class court system.

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