

Judge Sees Inequality at an Early Age

Overcomes prejudice in rise to the top of her class

BY CHARITY PRATER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

At the age of 18, Judge Adrienne Nelson was about to become valedictorian of her senior class. She lived in a small town, population 2,700, in Arkansas and went to high school with people she had known since childhood.

But becoming the first African American to achieve the school's highest academic honor was something that riled some members of her town.

"My mother was a teacher at the school and sought out an attorney when she learned that the school officials were tampering with the system in an attempt

Multnomah County Judge Adrienne Nelson achieved at school despite efforts to hold her back, and later become an accomplished attorney and judge.

PHOTO BY CHARITY PRATER/
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER



are incarcerated. She also enjoys doing public speaking and frequently attending church services.

"I am as equally proud to be an African American as I am to be a woman," she says. "As a judge, I try to treat people with respect and decency, just as I expect to be treated."

As we celebrate the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, it is a wonderful example of honoring a person who found himself in a situation he wasn't particularly expecting or prepared for, but accepted his calling.

Nelson found herself in a similar situation. Her mentors, friends and colleagues often cited her abilities and temperament as great attributes in becoming a judge, encouraging her to seek her calling.

When Nelson decided to pursue becoming a judge she didn't expect it to happen so quickly and so fluidly. She won the first time she ran, which was a blessing for her.

She now takes pride in following a strict code of judicial ethics and treating each person she sees with a tone of respect.

"I am doing what I am supposed to be doing," she says. "And I hope that I am making a difference."

to sabotage my win," Nelson says.

"I found out they were trying to devise a way for me to lose when the second runner up confronted me about it in class," Nelson says. "She told me that she wanted to take my first place spot!"

Town leaders and school officials denied that the controversy had anything to do with her race, but when the school principal stood in support of Nelson

Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski appointed her to the Circuit Court bench in Multnomah County. For almost a year now she has enjoyed her new name as Judge Nelson.

She gives credit to John Walker, the attorney that came to her aid in high school and filed a lawsuit against the school district on her behalf, for influencing her to go into law."

"I believe that we all have a responsibility to make the world better than when we came into it."

- Multnomah County Circuit Judge Adrienne Nelson

he was later nudged into an early retirement.

"It ruined my senior year in high school," says Nelson. "But it taught me at an early age to have values and deal with people as individuals and not by the color of their skin."

Nelson was finally named valedictorian of her school. She went to college and law school on scholarships that were awarded to her for academic achievements. She began practicing law in 1996 and last February,

"He gave me the inspiration to change and improve people's lives," she says.

One of Nelson's goals is to be an outstanding citizen both on the bench and off the bench.

"I believe that we all have a responsibility to make the world better than when we came into it," she says.

Nelson volunteers for numerous organizations, including the Columbia River Girl Scouts, which is focused on supporting girls who have mothers that



"I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear."

- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In January of 1966, King begins the Chicago campaign by moving into a freezing, dilapidated tenement on the West Side.



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