

Elizabeth Stafford: An “Unsung Hero” Recognized in Michigan

On September 19, 2013, Federal Bar Association member and Assistant U.S. Attorney Elizabeth Stafford, from the Eastern District of Michigan, became the 10th person to receive the Unsung Hero Award from the State Bar of Michigan for her commitment to the community. She is the first African-American woman to receive the award and sums up her dedication to the community and the profession with the proverb “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

Stafford grew up in Detroit and graduated from Wayne State University Law School in Detroit in 1993. She began her career at the historic firm Goodman, Eden, Millender & Bedrosian. Started by Ernest Goodman, George Crockett Jr., Morton Eden, and Dean Robb, and recognized as the country’s first racially integrated law firm. Stafford then joined another Goodman Eden alum, Hon. Victoria A. Roberts, to serve as a law clerk in 1998. She next joined the U.S. Attorney’s Office in 2002 and is currently assigned to the public corruption unit. Her boss, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan Barbara McQuade, nominated Stafford for the Unsung Hero Award. She described Stafford as not only an “outstanding trial attorney” but also as “contribut[ing] mightily to the bar.” In her nomination of Stafford, McQuade noted her fierce determination by recounting the story of Stafford breaking her shoulder during trial. Not only did she finish that day, she put off surgery to repair her crushed humerus for more than a week so that she could finish the trial. She was successful in the trial and her eventual recovery.

Stafford displays the same fortitude in her commitments to the Federal Bar Association. Even while trying criminal cases ranging from bank robberies to multistate drug conspiracies, Stafford has provided extensive service to the Federal Bar Association’s Eastern District of Michigan Chapter. A former member of the board of directors and a co-chair of the Diversity Committee, Stafford contributed to the development of the FBA Criminal

Mentoring program. As co-chair of the Diversity Committee, she helped organize the 2013 Diversity Summit, which was co-sponsored by the FBA Diversity Committee and the State Bar of Michigan Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee. Leaders from area special purpose bar associations, law firms, and nonprofit organizations attended the summit, and the Metropolitan Detroit Pipeline Coordinating Council (MDPCC) was born. It aims to harness the energy, ideas, and resources of various organizations and leaders to provide minority students from kindergarten through law school with the educational foundation necessary for success in the legal field. The MDPCC, though in its formative stages, intends to coordinate the provision of new and existing programming to provide skills building, mentoring, and guidance to students.

Stafford wants minority students to have the same cultivation she feels lucky to have received. It is not by accident that Stafford is a strong, intelligent, and capable woman. Her father and grandfather (a contemporary of Detroit civil rights icon Dr. Ossian Sweet) were both doctors. Her mother, Shirley McIntyre, is a social worker who served impoverished Detroiters suffering from HIV and AIDS. Stafford’s grandmothers were also dynamic figures. Her grandmother, Cheaber Hudson, taught foreign languages at Detroit’s Mumford High School and was also a peace ambassador. Once, she told her family she was going to Mexico for vacation when she was actually going to Nicaragua to be a peace monitor during a time of conflict. Stafford’s other grandmother, Lillian Givens, sued for racial discrimination in the 1930s when she was told to sit upstairs in a movie theater. In addition to her career as a teacher, Givens also served as a supervisor of the National Youth Authority, helping girls find jobs to provide for their families during the depression. Because of these, and other family members, Stafford was raised in an atmosphere of spirited debate and was encouraged to express her opinions. She credits



Assistant U.S. Attorney Elizabeth Stafford, recipient of the State Bar of Michigan’s Unsung Hero Award.



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this early exposure to analytical debate for her future successes.

Stafford wants to promote the development of strong critical thinking and language skills, both verbal and written, in the minority community. She hopes that the MDPCC will help to provide an atmosphere where these skills will be encouraged and can flourish. As part of her motivation in promoting language skills, Stafford cites Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's struggles with grammar at Princeton. Justice Sotomayor, who spoke Spanish at home, had trouble using proper syntax in her writing. With the mentorship of a dedicated professor, Justice Sotomayor was able to develop her written grammar. Stafford hopes that minority students can receive similar mentorship and guidance through the MDPCC's programs.

Stafford encourages minority youth to develop these necessary skills in the practice of law, not just as a way of helping them directly, but also to benefit the profession and the community as a whole. As an African-American prosecutor, Stafford recognizes the vital importance in having a criminal justice system that fairly reflects the diverse community it serves. This is of particular

importance given that the legal profession remains largely Caucasian and is not projected to change, even though the trend in the community is toward greater diversity. Stafford hopes that her efforts in the Federal Bar Association will not only expand minority penetration in the legal field in general, but also increase diversity specifically among federal court practitioners. Stafford hopes that the FBA Diversity Committee's programs will help to alleviate the under-representation of minorities who practice in federal court.

When asked if she feels like a hero after receiving the Unsung Hero Award, Stafford says that she feels like she is fulfilling an obligation. Stafford recognizes how fortunate she has been and is dedicated to giving back to the community. She believes that increasing diversity has layers. She has only scratched the surface and is still learning what the issues are, but there is definitely "more to do." Stafford will not be an unsung hero for long. ☉

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Middle District of Florida and Judge Joel F. Dubina in the Eleventh Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals. Before his appointment, Judge Lammens worked in the Torts Branch of the Civil Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, was an assistant general counsel for the City of Jacksonville, and an assistant U.S. attorney in Middle District of Florida.

The reception gave the local legal community the opportunity to mix and mingle while getting better acquainted with the newly appointed judges outside of the courtroom. Many young members of the legal community from UF Law also took advantage of this opportunity by introducing themselves to members of the Federal Bar and other distinguished members of the legal community.

Judge Lammens remarked, "The FBA event was a wonderful opportunity to meet and talk with lawyers and local judges from our North Florida community." The meeting also allowed some of the newly appointed judges to meet each other for the first time while connecting with old friends. Judge Lammens said, "It was also a great opportunity for me to meet U.S. District Judge Walker and U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Specie. I hadn't met them prior to the event, and I was delighted to have some time to speak with both of them. And, of course, it is always nice to have a chance to talk with U.S. Magistrate Judge Jones, whom I have known for several years." Judge Jones commented that he "would like to thank the board of the North Central Florida Chapter of the Federal Bar Association for hosting the event" and stated, "The turnout and support from the members of the Gainesville and Ocala legal communities was really outstanding."

Throughout the reception, many of the honored judges spoke about goals they have set for themselves during their tenure and expressed a deep commitment to the community. Judge Walker paid homage to the Gainesville bar stating that "I work in all four divisions" of the Northern District "and I find the highest quality of advocacy in Gainesville, making it a pleasure to work there." Judge Jones expressed a similar affinity to the Gainesville com-

munity stating, "The strong support by local federal practitioners for an event like this demonstrates that the greater Gainesville legal community has a vibrant and very able-bodied group of lawyers engaged in federal practice." Judge Walker also expressed his dedication to the region by vowing to conduct himself "in the tradition of Judge Paul and Judge Mickle" and recognized that he has "big shoes to fill." Judge Lammens expressed that he was particularly glad to see practitioners from Ocala and further discussed that he hopes that "... more local lawyers will handle the federal cases pending in the Ocala Division." All of the judges expressed gratitude to the chapter for hosting this event.

To close out the evening, the chapter held its annual meeting to elect its officers and general board members. The chapter thanks everyone for their attendance at the annual meeting and reception and welcomes the region's newly appointed federal judges. ☉

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