



by Kathryn C. Cole

# Hon. Carol Bagley Amon Chief Judge, Eastern District of New York

Until a feline dissection assignment during her undergraduate biology studies at the College of William & Mary, Chief Judge Carol Bagley Amon planned to follow her brother into the practice of medicine.

Realizing, however, that medicine was not for her, Chief Judge Amon chose instead to enroll in law school at the University of Virginia just as her cousin—whom she greatly admired—had done a few years earlier. Although she was embarking into what was, at that time, a male-dominated profession, Chief Judge Amon never thought twice about it. She recounts that her father—one of her biggest supporters—fully endorsed her decision to attend law school during a period when many fathers wanted nothing more for their daughters than to marry well. According to Chief Judge Amon, her father believed in a strong education for each of his children, and believed education was the cornerstone to independence and self-sufficiency.

Chief Judge Amon was born in Richmond, Va., the second of four children. She received a Bachelor of Science degree from William & Mary in 1968, and then graduated from UVA Law in 1971. Immediately after graduating from law school, Chief Judge Amon worked as a staff attorney for the Communications Satellite Corporation in Washington, D.C. Finding the regulatory component of the work less challenging than she had anticipated, she began to pursue other career options. As luck would have it, her roommate arranged an introduction to Myles Ambrose, who then headed a drug task force at the Department of Justice. After working for a short time with Ambrose in Washington, Chief Judge Amon married and transferred to the New York City office of the drug task force, where she served as a trial attorney. Thereafter, she was hired by the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York. During the chief judge's tenure as an assistant



U.S. attorney (AUSA), from 1974 to 1986, she served as chief of frauds (1978-1980), chief of general crimes (1981-1982), and senior litigation counsel (1984-1986).

While Chief Judge Amon believes much of her success in the profession is attributable to luck, it is clear that she ascended the ranks, in large part, because of her long-standing dedication to excellence and professionalism, and her willingness to embrace all challenges put before

---

*Kathryn Cole is counsel at Farrell Fritz, P.C. in Uniondale, N.Y., where she specializes in complex commercial litigation.*



her. One such career challenge presented itself while she worked as an AUSA, and involved the opportunity to be lead prosecutor on a large, high-profile federal criminal trial involving the exportation of arms and explosives to Ireland for use by the Irish Republican Army. She identifies this as the “breakpoint in the advancement of my career as a prosecutor.” This particular challenge did not present itself at the ideal moment, however. At that time, then AUSA Amon had two young sons and recognized that accepting the case would mean extended hours away from home preparing for trial. But, with the support of her husband—a corporate lawyer who himself had a demanding schedule—and the encouragement of her parents, she successfully embraced the opportunity.

After 12 years as an assistant U.S. attorney, Amon was appointed as a U.S. magistrate judge for the Eastern District of New York in 1986. She held this position until 1990, when she received a phone call from President George H.W. Bush asking whether she would accept his nomination to be a U.S. district judge in the same district. She was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on Aug. 3, 1990. Chief Judge Amon states that the personal telephone call from President Bush and their ensuing discussion is an “awesome memory” that she holds dear.

When asked about her early years on the bench, Chief Judge Amon recounts with fondness an individual whom she identifies as her “greatest supporter *on* the bench”—the late Judge John R. Bartels who, upon his passing in 1997, was the oldest sitting federal judge at 99 years of age. Judge Bartels served the public for 38 years as a federal judge and, according to Chief Judge Amon, always encouraged her to be her best. Specifically, during her early years as a magistrate judge, Amon recalls, with a smile, Judge Bartels telling her “stop hiding your light under a bushel—get out there!”

On April 3, 2011, when then Chief Judge Raymond J. Dearie assumed senior status, Judge Amon was appointed chief judge of the Eastern District of New York. In the two years since her appointment as chief judge, she has, among other things, participated in the hiring of a new clerk of the court and a new district executive; welcomed the arrival of Judges William F. Kuntz and Margo K. Brodie to the district; and witnessed the nomination of Pamela Ki Mai Chen to fill a vacancy on the bench. While it has been a busy time for the chief judge, it has been one that she is thrilled to have been part of.

Chief Judge Amon’s enthusiasm for her position, and her passion for the judiciary, are readily apparent. Indeed, her passion is reflected in her active involvement in the Judicial Conference of the United States, for which she currently serves as the district judge representative of the Second Circuit. She formerly served as the chair of the Judicial Conference’s Code of Conduct Committee, which provided ethical advice to judges, law clerks, and other court personnel. Chief Judge Amon believes that being a part of the Code of Conduct Committee allowed her to perform an important service to her colleagues throughout the United States.

The chief judge also teaches an annual course at Pepperdine University Law School entitled “Ethics for Law Clerks,” and supports the Federal Bar Council American Inn of Court, for which she is a past president. The Inn of Court endeavors to foster collegial interaction between the Bench and Bar through formal programs and informal discussions that promote the ideals of professionalism, mentoring, ethics and legal skills. Among its many goals, the Inn seeks to create a community of lawyers and jurists who will guide, mentor, and befriend each other. Chief Judge Amon believes it is invaluable for young attorneys to have networking opportunities to interact with federal judges as well as more seasoned practitioners. To that end, the chief judge supports the efforts of the Inn of Court and takes seriously her own mentoring obligations. Notwithstanding her busy schedule, the chief judge continues to be a role model for many attorneys, especially her current

and former law clerks. According to former clerk Dana Seshens, now a partner at a prominent New York City law firm, it was empowering to work for a woman who managed to be successful in her career and raise three sons, noting that Judge Amon “rose up through the legal ranks to the federal judiciary at a time when few women did so and she was able to achieve her professional success while simultaneously raising a family.”

Another former clerk, Ted Polubinski, also a partner at a prominent New York City firm, states that Judge Amon takes a keen interest in the lives and careers of all of her clerks and treats them “like an extended family.” Indeed, the chief judge continues to advise and mentor her clerks long after the clerkship has ended and, even with her current busy schedule, is available for career guidance and as a sounding board. Polubinski fondly recalls when the Chief Judge opened her courtroom to his daughter’s Girl Scout troop. Not only did Chief Judge Amon take the time to instruct the girls in a “mock trial”—including direct and cross examination, as well as jury deliberations—she also graciously took time to host the troop in chambers for juice boxes, home-baked brownies, and a question-and-answer session. According to Polubinski, “the girls were awestruck both with Judge Amon and with what they were able to accomplish so quickly under her tutelage. So was I.”

Both Seshens and Polubinski note the chief judge worked hard, every day, to demonstrate excellence, care and diligence in each case. She also held herself, and the counsel who appeared before her, to the highest standards of the profession. Clearly, the respect Chief Judge Amon

**When asked about her early years on the bench, Chief Judge Amon recounts with fondness an individual whom she identifies as her “greatest supporter on the bench”—the late Judge John R. Bartels, who, upon his passing in 1997, was the oldest sitting federal judge at 99 years of age.**

commands in the courtroom, in the community, and from her family, law clerks, deputies, and peers speaks volumes about her as a jurist and as a person. Chief Judge Amon's legacy is steeped in public service, her commitment to the District Court and its constituents, and a demand for excellence. She is a leader by example.

Chief Judge Amon looks forward to continuing to improve the district court as an institution, and to the inherent challenges in her responsibility as the Chief Judge of the Eastern District of New York—a judicial district that spans two courthouses, 26 Article III judges,

16 magistrate judges, and encompasses more than 300 employees including law clerks, support staff, courtroom deputies, and court reporters—to name but a few. ☉