

## Judicial Profile

EVAN A. JENNESS AND MARY CARTER ANDRUES

### Hon. Audrey B. Collins, Chief Judge U.S. District Court, Central District of California

Hon. Audrey Brodie Collins was sworn in as the chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California in January 2009. The elevation of Judge Collins to chief judge made her the third consecutive woman to hold the position. Chief Judge Collins brought to the federal bench a unique personal story, which reflects the history of our country and the civil rights movement for African-Americans and women. Her many accomplishments are the legacy of grandparents and parents who valued education and passed their beliefs on to their children and grandchildren.

As a jurist, Chief Judge Collins is widely respected for many laudable qualities. U.S. District Judge Christina A. Snyder, a friend and colleague, has “great admiration” for Chief Judge Collins. Judge Snyder describes the chief judge as “a superb leader, who skillfully deals with the challenges confronting our very busy court in a thoughtful and measured way.” According to U.S. District Judge Terry J. Hatter, a close colleague and former chief judge of the Central District, “We as a court have every reason to be proud of her—she’s always upbeat, even when assuming very challenging responsibilities.” Judge Snyder also notes that admiration for Chief Judge Collins extends beyond colleagues, litigants, and counsel. Judge Snyder once was approached by a neighbor who had served as a juror in Chief Judge Collins’ courtroom. The juror felt it was a “great experience as a result of Judge Collins’ demeanor and her concern for the welfare of the jurors, all of which fundamentally changed her views about the justice system.”

Chief Judge Collins is quick to credit her family for her accomplishments and her family history for the perspective she brings to the bench. Her grandfather, Rev. Furman L. Brodie, was born a slave in 1856 and did not learn to read until he was 16 years old. Undeterred by slavery, segregation, and discrimination, Rev. Brodie graduated from college at the age of 32,



receiving a degree in theology from Biddle University (now Johnson C. Smith University). Rev. Brodie and his wife, Annie, raised 11 children, including Dr. Furman L. Brodie Jr., Chief Judge Collins’ father.

Dr. Brodie, who acquired his father’s appreciation for education, graduated from Biddle University, then went on to receive a D.D.S. from Meharry Dental School. He practiced dentistry in Chester, Penn., for 50 years. In his earlier years, Dr. Brodie served in World War I and also worked as a barber and a Pullman porter, a position in which he and other African-Americans suffered the racial indignity of all being called “George,” after George Pullman, the founder of the Pullman Company and developer of the sleeper train car that bears his name. The work enabled Dr. Brodie to provide financial assistance to his siblings, thereby assisting several of Chief Judge Collins’ aunts to become teachers, one uncle to become a doctor, and another to become a high school principal.

At the age of 49, Dr. Brodie married Chief Judge Collins’ mother, Audrey Moseley Brodie, who also had a love of education. She graduated from high school

when she was only 15 years old and from Howard University when she was 18. She worked as an English teacher, so there were always books in the family home. She encouraged her children's intellectual curiosity by instructing them that "anything you want to read, you can read," and she let her daughter know that aspirations should be limitless. As a young girl, Chief Judge Collins told her mother that she wanted to become a nurse, to which her mother responded, "Why don't you want to be a doctor?" The chief judge's mother fostered confidence, and her father encouraged perseverance by telling his children to "stick like a postage stamp until you get there."

From early childhood, Chief Judge Collins understood the importance of ensuring social justice and overcoming prejudice. When she was just five years old, her family moved to a new home in Yeaton, Penn., an area that had a better school system than the one found in Chester. The new house was vandalized because the Brodies were the first African-Americans to move into the neighborhood. She witnessed racial segregation in the South, including signs directing "colored" and "white" persons to different public restrooms and balconies of movie theaters. On a trip with her mother to visit relatives in Virginia, the chief judge had to travel on the Maryland-Virginia Ferry. Although desegregated, the ferry still had separate restrooms designated for "whites" and "coloreds." She vividly recalls an occasion on which her mother marched the two of them into the restroom designated for white women, withstanding the icy stares of some other travelers. From her earliest years, Chief Judge Collins was emboldened by her parents' strength in the face of discrimination, belief in the talents of their children, and patient determination to create a world where all things are possible. This bore fruit as Chief Judge Collins attended Howard University and the School of Law at the University of California at Los Angeles, and eventually was appointed to the federal bench.

Chief Judge Collins always excelled academically. She was the valedictorian of her predominately white high school and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Howard University in 1967, where she also received the university's Woman of the Year Award. She received a master's degree in public administration from American University 18 months later. Before attending law school, she was the director of the Norman Topping Student Aid Fund at the University of Southern California, serving as a role model for African-American and minority students. Her family's commitment to education, her affinity for learning, her experiences with racism, and the civil rights movement all fostered her interest in the law. "We realized with everything that was going on in the civil rights movement, we needed to emphasize changing the law, changing institutions," explains Chief Judge Collins.

Chief Judge Collins credits much of her success to the support of her husband of 42 years, Dr. Tim Collins, the dental director for Los Angeles County. Dr. Collins



Rev. Furman L. Brodie, Annie Brodie, and family members, circa 1916. Judge Collins' father is in the back row, third from left.

strongly encouraged her to attend law school at the age of 29, even though the couple had a young child. The chief judge gave birth to her second child during her third year of law school. Chief Judge Collins recalls that there were few mothers who worked when she was growing up, "but mine always did." Growing up with the model of a working mother, Chief Judge Collins reflected that it never occurred to her that she could not do the same. In 1977, she earned her J.D. degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, where she was a member of the Law Review and graduated with the Order of the Coif. With her grandparents and parents as role models and her husband's love and support, Chief Judge Collins embarked on what would become a remarkable legal career.

Chief Judge Collins spent one summer as an intern with the Los Angeles district attorney's office. The experience inspired her to become a prosecutor and also made her sensitive to the needs of crime victims, who may be overlooked in the criminal justice system. "I felt that it was important for me, as a prosecutor, to be a voice for the victims of crime." Her brother, Bruce Brodie, an alternate public defender in Los Angeles County, states that, throughout her career, his sister has always been sensitive to victims of crime and particularly concerned about the rights of minorities and women.

After graduation from UCLA, Chief Judge Collins worked briefly for the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles as a staff attorney before joining the Los Angeles County district attorney's office, where she served for more than a decade and a half. She rose through the ranks, and in January 1988, she made history by becoming the first African-American appointed to the position of head deputy district attorney in Los Angeles. History was repeated in 1992, when then District Attorney Gil Garcetti appointed her assistant district attorney, making her the first African-American woman to hold the position. She also was the first person of color to serve as president of the Associa-

tion of Deputy District Attorneys.

In 2006, the John M. Langston Bar Association of Los Angeles presented Chief Judge Collins with the Bernard Jefferson Judge of the Year Award. That same year, her brother, Bruce Brodie, received the same association's Loren Miller Lawyer of the Year Award, making them the first siblings to win the awards in the same year. Despite the fact that they were on opposite sides of the courtroom when Chief Judge Collins was a prosecutor and Bruce Brodie was a public defender, he describes their philosophies as the same—"to help people, to be fair, and to ensure that justice is done." He points to his sister as a remarkable role model: "She always strived to be the best, set high standards for herself, and met those standards. She blazed the trail, letting me know that it was possible to succeed."

Chief Judge Collins has been a pillar of the Los Angeles legal community throughout her career. Among her many professional activities are membership on the board of trustees of the Los Angeles County Bar, on the State Bar Committee of Bar Examiners, and on the Los Angeles County Bar's Judicial Appointments Committee. In addition, she has served as the chair of the Los Angeles County Bar's Criminal Justice Section, president of the Association of Deputy District Attorneys of Los Angeles County, trustee of the John M. Langston Bar Association of Los Angeles, and chair of the Executive Committee of the State Bar Criminal Law Section.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton nominated her to the federal bench—an unusual appointment for a lawyer without substantial federal court or civil law experience, no judicial experience, and no political connections. Her appointment had appeared unlikely until Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) submitted her name to President Clinton for consideration. Those who met Chief Judge Collins during the confirmation process and have followed her career are not surprised by her success. Holly Fujie, the president of the California State Bar and a member of Senator Feinstein's Judicial Advisory Committee, states that "Chief Judge Collins was the first pick of Senator Feinstein's Judicial Advisory Committee during the Clinton Administration, and it is one of which we are extremely proud. She is a model of the best possible judicial demeanor, and her gracious behavior on the bench is a pleasure to observe. She is making a wonderful start on what I am sure will be an extremely successful term as Chief Judge."

A fearless ability to handle anything that comes before her with confidence, competence, and good cheer are signature traits of Chief Judge Collins. Judith Heinz, an assistant U.S. attorney in the Criminal Division of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles, was one of Judge Collins' first-year law clerks. She recalls that the judge was undaunted when she acquired an initial docket of 300 cases, a couple of computers with a "slow printer," and no law books; her reaction was to issue a standing order directing parties to provide copies of all legal authorities cited in their briefs. Another former law clerk, Brian McKeever, a professor of ethics and legal writing

at Loyola Law School, describes Chief Judge Collins as the "type of judge before whom lawyers hope to appear," noting that by the time motion papers first make it to the law clerks, they are highlighted and "accompanied by the Judge's insightful notes about how the given motion should be resolved." Judith Heinz notes that, "from the very beginning, Chief Judge Collins made sure that those in court were always treated courteously and that their matters were considered fully and fairly." From a clerk's perspective, "there was a wonderful feeling of family and cooperative work."

Chief Judge Collins believes that it is crucial for all participants in the judicial process to know that their views are important. Whether she is presiding over a meeting of her determined colleagues or hearing the arguments of strident counsel, she is renowned for her preparedness and courtesy. Litigants know that it is difficult—if not impossible—to be better prepared than the court. "Chief Judge Collins has a stellar reputation among lawyers who practice in federal court. Her intelligence, judicial temperament, and objective fairness make her a favorite among Los Angeles attorneys. I think the fact that she was a trial lawyer for so many years makes Chief Judge Collins uniquely sensitive to the lawyers appearing before her," says Yolanda Orozco, president of the Los Angeles Chapter of the Federal Bar Association.

Assuming the position of chief judge of the Central District of California is no easy task. Created on Sept. 18, 1966, the district encompasses seven counties, covers 40,000 square miles, and serves some 19 million people in southern and central California, making it the largest federal judicial district by population. Combined, there are 57 Article III judges and magistrate judges currently presiding in the Central District. As of May 2009, the court had more than 10,000 pending civil cases, including more than 500 pro se matters. Chief Judge Collins began her term with a backlog of more than 2,000 criminal matters that had been filed in the Central District in 2008; 20-plus of those cases involved more than eight defendants, and one case had 79 defendants. In addition, more than 2,000 federal habeas petitions were filed in the district in 2008.

Given the heavy dockets, Chief Judge Collins admonishes lawyers, "For heaven's sake be more civil because then so many of your disagreements melt away. The courtroom should be a place where you remember the lessons that your parents taught you—'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'" She remarks that, given the court's caseload, which is bursting at the seams, it would "help all of our lives if the attorneys would resolve many of the issues on their own. Remember that compromise is not a sign of weakness."

In addition to managing the workings of the court, Chief Judge Collins oversees two new pilot projects in the Central District: a program in which civil litigants may elect to proceed before a U.S. magistrate judge and a clinic for pro se litigants, which is a walk-in

facility in which court staff and lawyers work on a pro bono basis assisting the burgeoning population of unrepresented civil litigants. Other issues on Chief Judge Collins' administrative agenda include securing funding for a new courthouse in downtown Los Angeles and participating in the appointment process to fill three pending vacancies for Article III judges.

It sounds like a lot to handle, but that is right up Chief Judge Collins' alley. How does she do it all? Her family is the glue and, in the words of her father, she "sticks like a stamp" to the challenges posed by her position. **TFL**

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