



by Nantiya Ruan

Hon. Ronald L. Ellis, U.S. Magistrate Judge for the Southern District of New York

“No One Makes It On His Own”: Widening the Halls of Justice

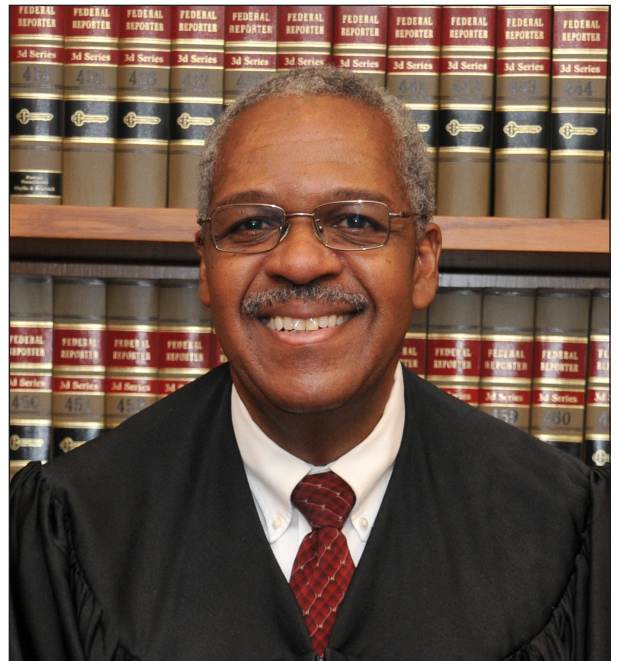
“My job is to make room for justice to take place.” —U.S. Magistrate Judge Ronald L. Ellis

Ronald Ellis finishes his 22nd year as a U.S. magistrate judge for the Southern District of New York with the same philosophy that began his career on the bench: The black robe is for justice. Judge Ellis holds fast to the belief that “for those who work in the judiciary, our purpose is justice—everything else is a distraction.” While justice is his working mandate, imparting that philosophy to the next generation of lawyers is his life’s work.

Lessons Learned: The Importance of Education

Judge Ellis was born on the Fourth of July, a fitting start to an American story. His father was a “common laborer,” a job title memorialized on Judge Ellis’ birth certificate. A self-made man, Herman Ellis moved his family from the cane fields of Louisiana to New York City in search of more promising prospects for his family. The move proved successful; his children became doctors and lawyers (and federal judges), and Herman himself became a civil servant for the U.S. Post Office. What made the difference was opportunity—for excellent schools and academic scholarships.

But those opportunities had to be found and pursued. The family enrolled four school-age Ellis children in a well-regarded parochial elementary school, even though Mr. Ellis worked multiple jobs to cover tuition. Howev-



er, the teachers were unsure about the Ellis children’s Southern education and wanted to put them back a grade. Their mother, Ella Mae, wouldn’t hear of it. She demanded that her children be put in the correct grades for their ages. Their ultimate success proved her right.

Ronald, the middle child, was an exceptional student. For high school, he attended Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx, also the alma mater of Justice Sonia Sotomayor, a future colleague in the South-

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ern District of New York. From there, he received a full academic scholarship to Manhattan College, a school well recognized in engineering, his chosen discipline. The analytical and technical aspects of engineering drew Judge Ellis but ultimately led to his pursuing a law degree at New York University as a Root-Tilden-Kern Public Interest Scholar. He, along with his wife, Kathleen, a retired librarian, passed this legacy for the love of learning on to their two adult sons, Jamil (a computer programmer for HBO) and Jelani (a head teacher at Berkeley Carroll School in New York city), and now to their baby granddaughter, Alexandra.

Breaking Down Barriers

Judge Ellis' legal career is defined by the number of institutional barriers he helped to break. Although law school demands full-time attention from its students, during his second and third years at New York University School of Law, Judge Ellis could more often be found at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) office. He was drawn to their civil rights mission and impact litigation goal of breaking down barriers for minorities in education and employment. However, upon graduation, the corporate behemoth Exxon heavily recruited and pursued him, looking for a minority lawyer with a chemical engineering background. Judge Ellis was one of the (very) few who fit the bill. He enjoyed his Exxon experience and stayed long enough to pass the patent bar, but was soon led back to the NAACP LDF by their siren song of justice.

Judge Ellis credits his long, 17-year career at the NAACP LDF with being in the right place at the right time, as well as by being ready for opportunities as they came. He first worked on impact litigation class actions, where he traveled all over the South to every state below the Mason/Dixon line representing black workers who were like his father but had been stymied by segregation, unable to move beyond institutional barriers. He worked on cases challenging discriminatory and unfair employment practices in company towns deep in Ku Klux Klan territory. He also carried a load of voting-rights cases, hoping to make an impact in deeply racially divided areas. Judge Ellis had to be on the road quite a bit, especially in Arkansas, where he sued the state for violating the Voter Rights Act of 1965 and where he and LDF attorneys Lani Guinier and Deval Patrick helped bring about needed change.

As the director of the Poverty and Justice Program for LDF, Judge Ellis worked to address the multifaceted problems facing poor people in America, from school inequality to integrated housing to environmental justice. In one particularly impactful case, he represented Milo Sheff (a fourth-grade student); Milo's mother, Elizabeth; and 10 other families to redress the inequity between the level of education provided to students in the Hartford, Connecticut, public schools and that available to children in surrounding suburban districts. In 1996, the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that the racial and so-

cioeconomic isolation of Hartford school children violated the state constitution. This landmark civil rights class action—*Sheff v. O'Neill*—lasted decades and changed the landscape of public education. Its settlement continues to be negotiated today.

Attorney Marianne Engelman Lado worked with Judge Ellis on *Sheff v. O'Neill* and remembered well her time being mentored by Judge Ellis: "Like many other interns and junior lawyers at LDF at that time, I was inspired not only by Judge Ellis' commitment to social justice and equality, and the example he set of skilled lawyering, but also his deep humanity. Judge Ellis' warmth and sense of humor were all the more extraordinary given the serious and troubling issues on our docket."

A Judge's Purpose

When Judge Robert Carter, himself a civil rights icon, approached the NAACP LDF about the expanded role of U.S. magistrate judges in the Southern District of New York, Judge Ellis thought about the need for parties to see a black man in the black robe. He applied for the open position, hoping to provide a place for unheard voices and to make a more visible and viable connection between process and justice. In short, Judge Ellis hoped for an opportunity, every day, to make a difference in someone's life.

For parties and advocates that appear before Judge Ellis, that is his remarkable gift: He makes every person feel heard and understood. In his own words, "Our legal system gives people who are powerless or voiceless a place to stand where everyone is listening to them. There are those that go through life feeling invisible, but in the halls of justice, we bear witness to them. I can bring nothing else to judging: letting people have their say and bear witness to their experience." As Justin M. Swartz, partner at the New York plaintiffs' employment law firm Outten & Golden LLP witnessed, "Judge Ellis is the best kind of judge, because his rulings are based on the facts and the law, not on the identity of the lawyers before him. If you have the best argument before Judge Ellis, you will win no matter whether you are a first-year lawyer or a seasoned veteran."

For Judge Ellis, the judicial process is one of respect—for the parties, advocates, and the tribunal itself. A good judge is a good referee: He doesn't abide by misbehavior and is quick to make sure parties follow the rules. That way, the process works for everyone. This is especially true in settlement, where a hearing in front of Judge Ellis can continue for long hours and days. Civil rights attorney Wylie Stecklow remembers his first settlement conference before Judge Ellis, appearing with six clients whose home had been raided by the police.

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It was a sensitive civil rights case, and “knowing that, Judge Ellis met with each of them individually to hear their stories, to talk to them about their claims.” Over the last 15 years, Stecklow has “watched Judge Ellis consistently interact with my clients with enormous patience, creating a positive experience for them. My clients get their moment in court and the judge listening and explaining. They leave feeling they are important and have been heard. In this way, he builds justice. Watching Judge Ellis interact with my clients has really affected me.”

Mentoring the Next Generation of Justice Seekers

Most federal judges view their law clerks with utilitarian eyes: They help them ease the pressure in chambers by researching, writing, and gatekeeping. But Judge Ellis has a different view. Federal clerkships are a

huge professional benefit to young lawyers, giving them a leg up in a competitive legal market. By hiring exceptional law graduates from diverse backgrounds, mentoring them closely while they are clerks and then throughout their legal careers, Judge Ellis does the most he can to maximize that benefit for future public interest lawyers.

Judge Ellis believes that judges and senior attorneys “have a duty to help young lawyers see that doing good in their work—to have empathy and to treat people with dignity, especially those without power—is a worthy cause.” His

success in mentoring his law clerks to go out and do good in the world is apparent from his former clerks’ current work. From the executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights to the chair and commissioner of the New York City Commission on Human Rights to foreign service diplomats to law school academics, Judge Ellis’ clerks are living examples of the impact opportunity and mentoring have on young lawyers. As Commissioner Carmelyn Malalis of the New York Commission on Human Rights observed, “Judge Ellis doesn’t just inspire by example—he spends time with the new lawyers he mentors to help them discover interests and think through career choices, and supports them through hard times. His dedication to mentoring is extraordinary, and he has definitely made a difference, as is evident by the lawyers he has mentored who have gone on to do meaningful work they love.”

His past and present law clerks, or “Ellisians,” are a tightknit group with three things in common: They serve the public interest, they come from diverse backgrounds, and they have a deep affection for Judge Ellis that transcends most judge/clerk relationships. The personal connection is intentional from the start; Judge Ellis hires his clerks only after they pass the “Thanksgiving

Dinner” test—that he would like them to share dinner with his family.

To foster that relationship, Judge Ellis tries to have lunch every day with his current clerks and interns, where the group discusses current events, popular culture, politics, religion, and philosophy. As former clerk Anna-Lisa Corrales noted, “You were encouraged to be curious about world events and life.” Clerks and interns read the day’s newspaper before lunch so they can engage in the conversation around the table. Judge Ellis himself is known to read several national and New York newspapers every day and is unmatched in the sheer range of global topics he’s interested in and ready to discuss at any given time.

But it is the professional development Judge Ellis fosters in his chambers that has a lasting impact on his clerks and interns. Clerks and interns learned to navigate ethics, privileges, settlement, and professionalism from “a master who always kept his cool,” as former clerk Jehanne Henry remembered. Judge Ellis is known for his “grace under pressure” and taught his clerks and interns to do the same through his example every day in his courtroom. The importance of good writing and communication was also underscored. Any correspondence, orders, or opinions that left chambers were closely edited by Judge Ellis, who taught his clerks to adopt a clear and succinct writing style.

Most important, Judge Ellis believes that his work with young lawyers is about paying it forward. As a frequent graduation speaker, adjunct professor, and panelist, Judge Ellis is constantly asked to speak with the next generation of lawyers, and he finds that work most rewarding. He wants young lawyers to know that they matter and encourages them to keep doing good in the world, beyond billable hours and toward a vision of justice. And through his patient and respectful courtroom demeanor and his mentoring of young lawyers, Judge Ellis exemplifies a life of service dedicated to justice.

In this way, Judge Ellis continues to pay it forward to pay homage to the opportunities and people in his life who have helped shaped him and his career.

When we look back in our lives, most of us can locate a few people who really had an impact on us, who really caused us to look at the world in a different way. For the young attorneys he mentored, Judge Ellis is one of those deeply impactful teachers in life. ☺

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