

Judicial Profile

JARID A. SMITH

Hon. Gerald Bruce Lee U.S. District Judge, Eastern District of Virginia

JUDGE GERALD BRUCE LEE's path to the federal bench began in the working-class streets of Southeast Washington, D.C., during the heart of the civil rights movement. The son of a government clerk and an auto mechanic, Judge Lee came of age in the turbulent social climate of the 1960s. The deep injustices of segregated America—laid bare in the raw violence of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.—profoundly affected Judge Lee and established the groundwork for his lifelong commitment to diversity, equality, and public service.

The Early Years

As a teen, Judge Lee participated in Pride Youth Incorporated, a community organization that provided jobs to inner-city youth. Though still in high school, Judge Lee had the good fortune to attend college-level classes through Pride Youth's American University Project. The experience empowered Judge Lee, allowing him to discover that he could not only keep pace but also excel in college-level classes, despite his high school guidance counselor's insistence that he "wasn't college material." After graduating from high school, Judge Lee continued on to American University as a full-time student. When he received his undergraduate degree in communications in 1973, he became the first person in his family to graduate from college.

Judge Lee remained at American University to attend law school, earning his J.D. degree from the Washington College of Law in 1976. After law school, he spent 15 years as a trial lawyer, eventually joining the partnership of Cohen, Dunn & Sinclair, P.C. based in Alexandria, Va. At the firm, he represented a wide range of individual and business clients—primarily from Northern Virginia—in both civil and criminal matters.

Throughout his career, Judge Lee pursued excellence in his legal work while also investing time and energy into his community. During his years as a trial lawyer, Judge Lee was an active member of a group



of attorneys in the Northern Virginia area involved in community-based activities and local government. Together, these attorneys campaigned for lieutenant gubernatorial candidate L. Douglas Wilder, who succeeded in becoming the first African-American to hold statewide office in the commonwealth of Virginia. Five years later, then Gov. Wilder recognized Judge Lee's ongoing commitment to Virginia by appointing him to serve on the board of directors of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, the body charged with managing Dulles International Airport and Reagan National Airport, both of which serve the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area.

Judge Lee's initial ascent to the bench took place in May 1992, when the Virginia General Assembly elected him to the 19th Judicial Circuit Court in Fairfax County, Va. Six years later, Virginia Senators Chuck Robb and John Warner recommended Judge

Lee for appointment to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. Twelve statewide bar associations evaluated Judge Lee's credentials, along with those of eight other candidates, and he was the only candidate to receive the highest rating from each bar association. President Clinton nominated Judge Lee on May 22, 1998, and on Sept. 28 of that year, the U.S. Senate confirmed him as a U.S. district judge.

The Rocket Docket

Judge Lee is in his 10th year on the bench in the Eastern District of Virginia, colloquially known as the "Rocket Docket" for the speed at which cases are processed through the court. The Eastern District of Virginia has the nation's fastest federal trial docket for civil cases. The judges strictly enforce a discovery period of 90 to 120 days and almost never grant continuances. The Eastern District's reputation for speed and efficiency has made the district court a highly sought-after forum for corporate litigants seeking swift resolution of complex commercial disputes. The courthouse's proximity to the Pentagon has also made it the host of the prosecution of many of the nation's highest-profile accused terrorists. During his tenure, Judge Lee has presided over a number of noteworthy cases, including the trials of Brian Patrick Reagan, the former Air Force master sergeant convicted of espionage; convicted terrorist Ahmed Omar Abu-Ali; Jay E. Lentz, the former Naval Intelligence officer charged in the kidnapping and murder of his ex-wife; and four MS-13 gang members accused of killing a witness who was in protective custody. Judge Lee has earned a reputation for treating all those who appear before him with cordiality and dignity, which has garnered the praise and appreciation of practitioners and parties alike.

Judge Lee continues to couple his courtroom work with a deep engagement in the greater legal community. He is well-known as an inspiring and accomplished lecturer, who speaks regularly to groups of judges, lawyers, and bar associations around the country. He has lectured and conducted mock trials at numerous law schools in Virginia and Washington, D.C., and is also a mainstay in the Virginia State Bar CLE circuit, offering his thoughts on pairing a thriving practice with a thriving family life. As a state court judge, Judge Lee served as chairman of the Judicial Conference of Virginia Judicial Education Committee, the body charged with meeting the continuing education needs of Virginia's trial judges. He has also authored or co-authored more than 50 continuing legal education outlines and legal publications on trial advocacy.

In order to meet the seemingly super-human demands that his docket and his work in the community place on his time and attention, Judge Lee relies heavily on the love and support of his family. His wife, Edna Ruth Vincent, is a prominent family law

attorney based in Northern Virginia. (She is, coincidentally, a former clerk of Judge Lee's colleague in the Eastern District, Hon. Leonie Brinkema.) Judge Lee's son, daughter-in-law, and grandson also live close by and manage to wrest the judge away from his commitments every so often and treat him to an adventure on the links.

Reaching Back

Judge Lee lives by the mantra that "to whom much is given, much is expected."

The great strides he has made in his career have been matched by his deepening commitment to reach back and provide opportunities for those who come after him. The lessons he learned as a youth during the civil rights movement of the 1960s have inspired him to continue the fight for inclusion throughout his career. Judge Lee has been a powerful advocate for increasing minority representation in law schools, in law firms, and on the bench at all levels. His advocacy begins in his chambers, where he mentors interns and clerks from diverse backgrounds, and extends out through lectures to law schools and bar associations across the nation. Each year, Judge Lee also mentors several minority law students from his alma mater, American University, sharing his thoughts on habits needed for success and encouraging them to become active participants in the greater legal community.

Judge Lee imagines a future without barriers to participation in the legal system. But increasing the ranks of minority judges requires reaching out beyond the bench and out to schoolchildren, who are just beginning to form their own self-identities. Judge Lee works hard to counter the damaging limitations imposed on children from poor neighborhoods, like the negative advice he received from his high school guidance counselor, who insisted that he "wasn't college material." Every year, Judge Lee attends Camp Kappa, a weeklong sleep-away camp run by the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, and conducts a mock trial exercise for the campers. The camp provides the opportunity for 50 boys between the age of 10 and 15, primarily from inner-city D.C. and Virginia, to spend a week in Hemlock Overlook Park in Clifton, Va. Over the course of the week, Judge Lee, his present and past clerks, and other lawyers from the Northern Virginia area, teach the campers about the process of

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Judge Gerald Bruce Lee with his law clerks—(back row, l to r) Andrew Rodgers; Jarid A. Smith; Judge Lee; Bernard Akatu; (front row, l to r) Heather Byrd; and Vanessa Rodriguez.

conducting a criminal trial—including opening and closing statements, testimony, and direct and cross examination. The week culminates in a mock trial put on by the campers that takes place at the Fairfax County Circuit Courthouse. Coming from a background that is similar to that of the campers, Judge Lee is able to connect with them on a level that few other professionals of his stature can, and he can convey that the successes that he has enjoyed are possibilities for each of them.

Judge Lee's passion for making the legal community more inclusive has also inspired him to co-chair the biennial conference of the Just the Beginning Foundation (JTBF), entitled "Reaching Back, Lifting Up." JTBF is a nonprofit organization that supports students of color and other underrepresented groups by providing free educational and mentoring programs in an effort to increase diversity in the judiciary and legal profession. The conference, which will take place in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 25–28, 2008, will bring together African-American federal judges from across the country in the nation's capital to engage in fellowship with one another and interact with practitioners, professors, and students from the Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Richmond regions.

While attending the past seven biannual confer-

ences, the judges generally have communed with the bar groups in the host cities, but Judge Lee and the JTBF executive committee have made reaching out to local schools a primary goal of this year's conference. On Thursday, Sept. 25, the conference will hold an event titled "Robes in the Schools," during which approximately 40 federal and state judges will visit 14 high schools, colleges, and law schools in Washington and Baltimore area. The judges will discuss pathways to the bench, strategies for success in the profession, and the value of judicial internships and clerkships. On Friday, Sept. 26, American University will host the "Pathfinder Judges" panel, during which Judge Reggie Walton of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia and Judge Marcia Cooke of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida will share their personal stories with students and describe their paths to the bench. On Saturday, Sept. 27, the conference will feature a panel discussion for local high school students, entitled "So You Want to Be a Lawyer," which will feature Judge Ricardo M. Urbina of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, John Truong of the U.S. Department of Justice, and Savalle Sims, a former law clerk to Judge Lee and current partner at Arent Fox, a large law firm in the Washington, D.C., area.

Judge Lee's childhood was shaped by witnessing the activists who were working to change the world around him. Like them, he has taken a proactive role in creating a more inclusive society. Judge Lee does more than take a passing interest in aspiring future attorneys; through his work behind the scenes and on the bench, Judge Lee remains actively engaged in supporting, mentoring, challenging, and motivating tomorrow's legal leaders. **TFL**

Jarid Smith clerked for Judge Lee from 2007 to 2008. He is an associate in the Washington, D.C., office of Wiley Rein LLP.