

HON. VICKI MILES-LAGRANGE

CHIEF JUDGE, WESTERN DISTRICT OF OKLAHOMA

JUDICIAL PROFILE BY TYNAN GRAYSON

Chief Judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange is one of America's most dedicated public servants. She reveres the rule of law and has committed her talents, idealism, diplomatic skills, and legal expertise to improve the legal systems of several developing countries. Her frame of reference for the rule of law has been shaped by many forces: her upbringing in the historically segregated section of far northeast Oklahoma City in the 1950s, her education at Vassar College, her legal training at Howard University, service as an Oklahoma state senator, and certainly her daily work as chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma. Her frame of reference was broadened by her appointment in 1999 by the late Chief Justice William Rehnquist to the International Relations Committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States.

The chief judge works tirelessly to ensure that all people have access to the promises and possibilities that come with true freedom. She has worked diligently, far from safety and her home, to make the freedoms and opportunities we have in America a reality for others. Those who know her well wonder where she gets her boundless energy and infectious enthusiasm. Judge Miles-LaGrange explains that being too tired to serve others is simply not an option.

Giving your best to everything you do was instilled in Judge Miles-LaGrange at an early age by her parents, who, according to her, were ordinary people with extraordinary aspirations for her and her sister, Gayle Miles-Scott. Her mother, Mary Lou Miles, was her kindergarten teacher, and her father, Charles Miles, taught at her middle school before going on to become an assistant high school principal. Her parents emphasized the value of education and lifelong learning. Her parents encouraged her to develop good study habits and to always do her best. These principles were echoed by one of her Grandmother Carrie's favorite sayings, which still guides Judge Miles-LaGrange today: "Good, better, best. I must work harder than the rest until my 'good' becomes my 'better' and my 'better' becomes my 'best.'"

Judge Miles-LaGrange was always interested in public service, and she knew from an early age that she wanted to be a lawyer. During her junior year, she was selected to represent Bishop McGuinness High School at the 1970 Oklahoma Girls State program to participate in a mock state government. She was elected governor by the 416 delegates to the assembly, only eight of whom were African-American. As governor, she rightfully expected to represent Oklahoma at the 1970 Girls Nation program in Washington, D.C., and to participate in a mock federal government, but she learned the night before the announcement that the decision was made not to send her because she was a "Negro." According to Judge Miles-LaGrange, "that was the greatest lesson I ever learned about the dignity of losing, and about what can happen when fear, ignorance, and prejudice prevail. It made me determined to confront injustice whenever I saw it with an unbroken spirit and with an attitude of love."



Judge Miles-LaGrange went on to graduate cum laude from Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and received a certificate from the University of Ghana in Accra, Ghana, West Africa. She received her law degree from Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C., where she was editor of the *Howard Law Journal*.

The chief judge has had an interesting career. She worked as a television news reporter for Oklahoma City's CBS affiliate for three summers while she was in college. After a federal judicial clerkship in the Southern District of Texas, she worked as a criminal trial attorney in the Honors Program at the U.S. Department of Justice; in that position she developed cases for the deportation—and subsequent prosecution—of alleged Nazi war criminals living in the United States under assumed identities. Upon her return to Oklahoma City, she prosecuted sex crimes as an assistant district attorney in Oklahoma County.

In late 1986, after a successful grassroots political campaign, Judge Miles-LaGrange defeated a 22-year incumbent to become the first African-American woman elected to Oklahoma's state senate. During her seven-and-a-half-year tenure, she served as chair of the Oklahoma Senate Judiciary Committee for five years and later chaired the Oklahoma Legislative Black Caucus. She also served as chair of the Law and Justice Committee of the National Conference of State Legislators. Concurrent with her service in the senate, she practiced law with the firm of Miles-LaGrange and Colbert.

Tom Colbert, her partner at the firm, is the first African-American appointed to the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton appointed Judge Miles-LaGrange to the position of U.S. attorney for the Western District of Oklahoma. She was the first female U.S. attorney in Oklahoma and among the first in the nation. While serving as U.S. attorney, Judge Miles-LaGrange oversaw the prosecution of a public corruption case involving an alleged bribery and kickback scheme involving more than a billion dollars in state investment funds. At the time, it was heralded as the largest scam to take money from a single office in state history. In that position, she also implemented Oklahoma's first Weed and Seed Program, which was inaugurated by Attorney General Janet Reno.

President Clinton appointed Judge Miles-LaGrange to the federal bench in 1994, and she became the first African-American appointed to the federal bench in the six-state Tenth Circuit. Since her appointment to the bench, she has worked tirelessly to earn a reputation as a competent, prepared, fair, and impartial judge.

In addition to her work on the bench, Judge Miles-LaGrange is a champion of human rights within and beyond the borders of the United States. Since 2001, she has worked in Rwanda to restore justice under the rule of law after the genocide of one million people in 1994. Her team's goal was to establish an adequately funded court system that had control over its own budget and was administered by competent and impartial judges subject to a judicial code of ethics and conduct. These efforts have led to the establishment of new laws to propel Rwanda forward, the identification of outdated laws, and the drafting of new laws for consideration by Rwanda's Cabinet and National Assembly. As a member of another review team, Judge Miles-LaGrange worked to prepare a detailed assessment that could be used for judicial education and training as well as recommendations to assist the newly appointed judges to assume their new roles in Rwanda's reformed judicial system. For her continuing efforts in Rwanda, where she had to overcome discomfort, fatigue, and risk to her life, Judge Miles-LaGrange received the Oklahoma Bar Association's prestigious Fern Holland Courageous Lawyer Award in 2006.

As a member of the International Judicial Relations Committee, she worked with judges and courts around the world on matters related to the establishment and expansion of the rule of law and administration of justice consistent with the U.S. judicial system. She continues to work with courts in Africa, South America, and Asia; and, as part

of the Library of Congress' Open World Program, she has hosted members of the judiciary of foreign countries in Oklahoma—including Russian judges in 2001.

Judge Miles-LaGrange's "Oklahoma spirit" compels her to read and write about Oklahoma's history in her spare time. She co-authored *A Passion for Equality: The Life of Jimmy Stewart*, which was a finalist for the 2000 Oklahoma Book Award. The book was a biography of the life of James E. Stewart, a civil rights champion in Oklahoma who rose from janitor to vice president of one of Oklahoma's largest utility companies. Not unlike Judge Miles-LaGrange, Stewart was passionate about equality and fought for it aggressively and with integrity. The chief judge was also a contributor to *Voices from the Heartland*, Oklahoma's centennial book, which featured essays on life and living written by women from Oklahoma.

Judge Miles-LaGrange is a role model for Oklahomans

of all backgrounds who want to pursue careers in public service. She still finds time to volunteer her services and to mentor young people. Currently, she makes time every week to volunteer as a mentor and tutor to children participating in "Whiz Kids," a faith-based program for children in need of guidance and care. She has made a multiyear commitment to the program in order to

provide what she says "is for some participants, the only continuity they have ever known."

Judge Miles-LaGrange has amassed too many honors to list in this brief profile. To highlight just a few, she was inducted into the Oklahoma Child Advocates Hall of Fame and the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame; she also received the Oklahoma Public School Foundation's Wall of Fame Humanitarian Award and the Oklahoma Bar Association's Trailblazer Award. She will certainly receive many more accolades before all is said and done, and she will accept them with the humility and graciousness that is her trademark, but she does not do what she does in order to get praise or recognition. Public service is in her blood. As long as people in Oklahoma, the United States, and throughout the world are in need, she will continue to serve. Judge Miles-LaGrange is supported in all of her efforts by her parents, her sister, her daughter, Johnna Watts, her son-in-law, and her three grandchildren. **TFL**



Judge Miles-LaGrange with her family.

Tynan Grayson formerly clerked for Judge Miles-LaGrange. She is currently an attorney with Crowe & Dunlevy in Oklahoma City.