

Judicial Profile

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Hon. Tanya Walton Pratt U.S. District Judge, Southern District of Indiana

ON JUNE 15, 2010, THE newspaper headlines across Indiana almost uniformly read “Judge Pratt Makes History.” When Judge Tanya Walton Pratt was sworn in as an Article III judge for the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Indiana,

she became the first African-American federal judge in Indiana’s history. President Barack Obama nominated her based on the recommendations of Indiana’s two senators: Democratic Sen. Evan Bayh and Republican Sen. Richard Lugar. The U.S. Senate confirmed her nomination by a vote of 95-0. Sen. Bayh described Judge Pratt as “an exceptional jurist who has proven her dedication to public service and the rule of law.” He stated that she is a “highly qualified individual with an impeccable record and a rich background that will help move Indiana closer to our goal of realizing equal justice under the law.”

Judge Pratt’s rich background, however, began long before her legal career. Judge Pratt, a native of Indianapolis, was first drawn to the legal profession as a child. Her father, the late Charles Walton Sr., was a criminal defense attorney in Indianapolis who would take his daughter to Saturday court sessions, where she watched him litigate cases. Submerged in the legal community at a young age, she quickly realized her calling. Judge Pratt eventually set off to college to pursue a career in law. Following family tradition, she attended Spelman College in Atlanta, where she received her B.A. in 1981.

After graduating from college, Judge Pratt moved to the nation’s capital to study law at Howard University School of Law. While she was in law school, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall visited his alma mater and spoke with her and other students. The meeting inspired Judge Pratt and left a memorable impression. What is more important, however, is that Judge Pratt met her future husband, Marcel Pratt, in law school. He received his J.D. in 1983, and Judge Pratt received her J.D. in 1984. This dynamic duo returned to Indianapolis in 1984 to practice law at Mance Moss & Walton, a firm with a reputation for litigating groundbreaking civil rights cases.

Mance Moss & Walton was formed in 1962 by Mercer Mance, John Moss III, and Judge Pratt’s father, Charles Walton Sr. Most notably, these legal and social pioneers represented the greater Indianapolis branch



of the NAACP in numerous lawsuits, including a class action suit in which the Indianapolis public school system was found to have a de jure segregation system and was ordered by U.S. District Judge S. Hugh Dillin to integrate its schools. When Judge Pratt joined the firm, she soon found herself in the midst of the firm’s next high-profile civil rights case: the wrongful death of Michael Taylor, a 17-year-old African-American, who was found dead in the back of a police car in 1987. Officials claimed that Taylor had shot himself in the head, even though his hands were handcuffed behind his back. The officials’ claim sparked mass protests in Indianapolis. Mance Moss & Walton, along with Judge Pratt’s help during the early stages of the case, eventually obtained a \$3.55 million judgment from an all-white jury in 1996. At the time, this was the largest judgment against a municipality in Indiana’s history.

In addition to civil rights work, Judge Pratt also practiced in the areas of family law, personal injury, and criminal law. She became a partner in the firm, whose current name, Walton & Pratt, now reflects her contributions to the firm. Judge Pratt’s experience as an attorney was not limited to private practice, however. She also served as a contract public defender

for five years, representing defendants in Marion County Superior Court. Her mentor, Marion County Judge Webster Brewer, who appointed her to the public defender position, also provided her with the opportunity to temporarily serve as his commissioner. Thereafter, Judge Brewer encouraged her to become more involved with local politics and to run for a seat on the Marion County Superior Court.

The up-and-coming young lawyer eventually became a part-time commissioner for Judge Webster Brewer in 1993 and served as master commissioner in Marion Superior Court until 1996. In November 1996, Judge Pratt was elected to a six-year term as a Marion County Superior Court judge. She was re-elected in 2002 and 2008, winning the overwhelming majority of votes in her district. She served as presiding judge of the Superior Court, Criminal Division One, from 1997 to 2008, and as supervising judge for the Marion County Juvenile Detention Center from 2007 until June 2010.

Marion County has the busiest court system in Indiana, accounting for 20 percent of all Indiana state court cases filed and disposed of each year, 40,000 of them criminal cases. While serving in the Criminal Division, Judge Pratt presided over 20 to 35 major felony trials annually and three capital cases. The judge describes the majority of nonviolent criminal defendants as “people that make mistakes, poor decisions, and who have a lack of opportunity,” explaining that, “at the heart of their crimes often lay mental illness, substance abuse, a lack of education, and poverty.” She believes that, ultimately, “many people want to change their criminal behavior, while only a small segment of people are destined to be career criminals.”

From 2008 until her appointment to the federal bench, Judge Pratt served as presiding judge in the Probate Division of Marion County Superior Court. One of the most rewarding aspects of that position was her involvement in adoption hearings. Keeping with tradition, Judge Pratt took time during the winter holidays to hear more than 60 adoption petitions on a day known in Marion County as “Adoption Awareness Day.” She described the noncontested adoptions as “one of the few occasions in the courthouse that is a happy and joyous event for everyone involved,” recognizing that “families that adopt children are unsung heroes of our community.”

Throughout Judge Pratt’s career, she has remained active in the legal community. The judge has served as secretary of the Indiana State Bar Association, life member and board member of the Marion County Bar Association, and vice president of the Indianapolis Bar Association. She has also served on the Board of Managers of the Indiana Judges’ Association and is the current chair of the Indianapolis Bar Association’s Professionalism Committee. Indiana’s late governor, Frank O’Bannon, appointed Judge Pratt chair of Indiana’s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday

Commission, and she served in that capacity from 2001 to 2007. Chief Justice Randall Shepard of the Indiana Supreme Court also appointed Judge Pratt to serve on the Indiana Sentencing Policy Study Commission in 2005.

The number of awards that Judge Pratt has received seems countless, from Outstanding Judge of the Year awarded by the Indiana Coalition Against Sexual Assault Inc. to the Breakthrough Woman Award given by the Indianapolis Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women.

Judge Pratt’s appointment to the federal bench has had an impact on the state in many ways. Her nomination was praised across Indiana as an example of bipartisan efforts by Sen. Bayh and Sen. Lugar to select what Sen. Bayh describes as a judge with the “highest ethical standards and a firm commitment to applying the country’s laws fairly and faithfully.” Sen. Bayh believes that, because Judge Pratt is the first African-American federal judge in Indiana’s history, her confirmation will allow Indiana to continue to move forward in its pursuit of equal justice for all. He hopes that “her success will inspire Hoosier children of all backgrounds to pursue their dreams by working hard and playing by the rules.” And Judge Pratt said it best: “The significance of being the first is that it encourages others to reach the heights of our profession.”

Judge Pratt’s transition to federal court has not come without hard work. She was responsible for closing out her state court cases as well as 350 pre-existing civil cases that had been reassigned to her in the federal district court along with new civil and criminal cases. She believes that the hardest part of being a judge is the need to be a generalist. One day, she says, “you are working on a technical aspect of a patent case and the next day you are hearing Social Security appeals and dealing with the rights of criminal defendants.”

Outside of the legal community and away from the hustle and bustle of the courthouse, Judge Pratt enjoys traveling, researching genealogy, gardening, cooking, and spending time with her family. She and her husband, Marcel, are the proud parents of a daughter, Lena, who is currently a junior in college and hopes to become an attorney like her parents.

In view of Judge Pratt’s extraordinary career, it is no surprise that she found her way to the federal bench. The historical significance of her selection—as the first African-American federal judge in Indiana’s history—should continue to inspire people from all backgrounds. Despite how much she has already accomplished, in many ways, Judge Pratt’s career is just beginning and will certainly be worth following in the many years to come. **TFL**

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