

## Judicial Profile

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SHAWNA CASTELLS

# Hon. Karen Wells Roby U.S. Magistrate Judge, Eastern District of Louisiana

ONE MORNING IN 2006, a letter arrived unexpectedly in the chambers of Hon. Karen Wells Roby, U.S. magistrate judge for the Eastern District of Louisiana. The letter, written by a plaintiff's attorney, stated:

Now that the litigation is completed I feel compelled to write the Court about the work of Magistrate Karen Roby. ... I have been involved in countless mediation conferences with a variety of judges, professional mediators, and magistrates. Never in my experience have I seen a more professional, sensitive, and effective settlement assistance than given to the parties by Magistrate Karen Wells Roby. Magistrate Roby's sensitivity and forcefulness as well as good sense and patience settled one of the most acrimonious lawsuits in which I have ever been involved. She even went so far as to mediate the state visitation dispute involving the minor child.

Five years later, in 2011, Judge Roby received another letter about the same legal matter. This letter, however, was written by the former plaintiff, who wished to update Judge Roby on the status of the child whose life was affected by the federal dispute. The child's mother wrote, "I have wanted to write you for some time to send you a picture of my dear sweet son." The mother pointed out that, in addition to settling the federal claim, Judge Roby had settled an issue regarding the visitation calendar that was pending in state court. The mother wrote, "I wanted you to see how well he is doing now. I wanted to tell you, you are a wonderful person and I personally thank you from the bottom of my heart."

In another case, in 2000, a defense attorney wrote the following to Judge Roby: "You played a key role in the settlement of this difficult litigation. Your willingness to take [the settlement request] at the last minute to keep the parties working toward a compromise long after regular office hours was critical." Judge Roby's effectiveness in settling cases has seemed to compel individuals to seek her



out well after their legal matters pending before her have been resolved. It is important to note that, even though settlement conferences are but one of her many duties on the court, Judge Roby's effectiveness in this area has not gone unnoticed by the court, counsel, and the public.

Judge Roby is certainly a trailblazer, and not simply because she was the first African-American female to be appointed a U.S. magistrate judge in the state of Louisiana. She is a trailblazer in that she has rebuffed the stereotype that judges are above the public or are otherwise off limits. Judge Roby never lets the prestige of her position affect how she deals with people. Therefore, people find her approachable and knowledgeable on the law, and they are comfortable with having her resolve their conflicts.

Judge Roby became interested in the legal profession at a very young age. As a high school student, she spent the summer of her junior year studying law and philosophy in a program designed for minority high school students who were interested in the law. It was there that she met her mentor of over 20 years, Justice Bernette J. Johnson, who was a practicing attorney at the time and was later elected judge of the Civil District Court for the State of Louisiana. Upon graduating from law school, Judge Roby served as Justice Johnson's judicial law clerk. Her high school experience prepared Judge Roby to



Judge Max Tobias, Louisiana Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, and Judge Roby with the 2011 LSBA/JTBF Suit up for the Summer: High School Summer Legal Institute and Intern Program best oralist winners.

perform well at Xavier University in Louisiana during her college years and, thereafter, at Tulane University Law School, from which she graduated in 1987.

Judge Roby's experience as Justice Johnson's law clerk helped her to realize that her passion was litigation, particularly in the area of products liability. After her clerkship, Judge Roby entered private practice. After a few months with a small plaintiff's firm, she joined Bernard Cassisa, a defense firm noted locally in Louisiana for its focus on products liability law.

Judge Roby remained with Bernard Cassisa for several years until she joined Deutsch Kerrigan Stiles, a mid-sized firm in New Orleans. Her diligence and superb performance allowed her to continue her practice in products liability until she was appointed by the Louisiana Supreme Court to serve as a judge pro tempore on the Civil District Court for the Parish of New Orleans in 1998. She served as a judge in this capacity for one year and then resumed her practice with Deutsch Kerrigan Stiles. Her practice also included legal malpractice and other insurance defense work. Later, Judge Roby served as a partner and head of the Product Liability Section at Vial, Hamilton, Koch & Knox's New Orleans office.

Judge Roby's experiences on each side of the legal system were noticed when she was appointed as a U.S. magistrate judge for the Eastern District of Louisiana in 1999. During her time on the bench, she has developed a reputation as a fair, even-tempered, prepared, and diligent judge with a unique ability to help parties resolve their disputes before trial. She is noted in the legal community as a judge who enjoys helping others resolve their disputes, regardless of how challenging the matter. Judge Roby has been characterized by a colleague as a "judge who gets it done."

Judge Roby considers the courtroom as more than a venue where legal conflicts are resolved. She views the courtroom as a place that has the unique ability to educate both the local and legal communities.

Judge Roby, who is passionate about children, has always sought to use her judicial position as a tool to teach children. She routinely teaches children about the judicial process by visiting classrooms and allowing children to conduct mock trials in her courtroom. For example, she recently hosted a mock trial for fourth-graders from St. Paul's Episcopal School in New Orleans. The case was entitled *Snow White vs. The Wicked Witch*, and the students dressed up in character as they tried the case before a jury of their peers. After the jury of students returned a verdict in this case, Judge Roby answered questions about the function of the courts in their lives and discussed the different branches of government.

Judge Roby also uses the courtroom to educate members of the legal community. She is a frequent participant in the Federal Bar Association's "Lunch with the Court" program, which hosts local lawyers for a brown-bag style lunch. During these lunches, Judge Roby answers questions posed by young lawyers making their way in the legal profession. This is only one example of Judge Roby's passion for helping the next generation of lawyers.

The judge has also helped struggling law students pass the bar by tutoring them. One of the students she has tutored, Courtney Courseault-Thornton, currently in-house counsel for the New Orleans Aviation Board, has said of Judge Roby's efforts, "Judge Karen Wells Roby's dedicated spirit and strong commitment to excellence are qualities which I admire. However, it is not uncommon that someone is committed to excellence in his or her personal quest for success. What makes Judge Roby unique is her congenial disposition and commitment to helping those around her achieve excellence. This has been particularly demonstrated by her tireless efforts to successfully mentor many, including myself, through the bar exam. I will be forever grateful for this experience."

The judge also mentors young female lawyers on how to navigate the profession. Lauren B. McKnight of LMC Consulting Group, a young lawyer the judge has mentored, has the following to say about Judge Roby:

Judge Roby is an amazing mentor and our relationship has developed into a friendship, which has been five years in the making. She has been a demanding mentor and challenged me to reach my fullest potential at all times. She set high standards for my legal practice and community involvement that have changed my approach to the law and volunteer efforts. As a young lawyer, I focused most of my attention on my legal practice. Judge Roby reminded me that I have more to offer my community than mere legal services. She encouraged community activities outside the bar that utilized my talents and passion to help more people. As a result, I volunteered with at-risk youths,

worked at several domestic violence shelters, and raised money for numerous charities. I am honored to call her my mentor and hope others are lucky enough to find a mentor like Judge Roby.

Judge Roby's other educational efforts have included setting up outreach programs at local schools. Her commitment to education has spanned her professional career. She and her family have donated furniture and computers to a local school, and she even helped design a website to help a local public elementary school improve its ability to communicate with the public and its student population.

Currently, she is serving as the coordinating judge in Louisiana for the LSBA/JTBF Suit Up for the Summer: High School Summer Institute and Intern Program, which is a result of a partnership between the Just the Beginning Foundation and the Louisiana State Bar Association. When speaking about the program, Justin DiChara, a senior at St. Paul's School in Mandeville, La., said, "Out of all the years I have participated in programs throughout the state of Louisiana, this is the best I have seen yet. The [program] has changed my life. Not only did I make life-long friends, but also I met some of the most successful attorneys in Louisiana, had a true taste of the everyday life of law, experienced the ins and outs of law school, and increased my knowledge, self-discipline, and ardor in the fields of law and academics in general."

Throughout her career, Judge Roby has often been the first and only African-American hired by an employer, and, as a result, her life has demonstrated the importance of diversity in the legal profession. Mindful of her path to the bench and the mentors she has had during her career, in addition to other volunteer efforts, Judge Roby hosted two summer interns through the Summer Judicial Internship Program, which is an Internship Diversity Pilot Project created in 2011 by the Judicial Resources Committee (a committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States) and the Just the Beginning Foundation and designed to improve the pipeline to diversity in the courts. Through this program, students were placed as interns in Judge Roby's chambers and given the opportunity to experience the legal profession from the bench's point of view, including drafting orders and opinions on procedural and substantive matters. Rudi Julius, an intern and student at Cornell University Law School had this to say about her summer experience: "The JRC-JTBF Joint Internship Diversity Project has been a truly enriching and rewarding experience. Judge Roby never treated me as if I were just an intern or a student in a diversity program; because she challenged me to work hard and maximize my potential, I was able to complete assignments that I never dreamed I would even get to see as a first year law student. I am forever grateful for the invaluable work and life experience I have gained and the relationships that I have built. I look forward to future involvement with this unique program."

At least once during the intern's experience, the judge, along with her staff, coordinated a potluck luncheon in

which staff members celebrated their hard work and their various cultures. Just like her diverse staff, Judge Roby finds it important to experience the cuisine of other cultures as another part of her educational toolbox. When asked why she takes the time to host these luncheons, the judge responded, "We work hard every day and it is important to take the time to get to know the people you work with on a different level, and food always seems to cause people to relax." The potluck luncheons held in Judge Roby's chambers have celebrated a variety of cultures and cuisines, including Vietnamese, Lebanese, Indian, Cuban, Soul food, and American favorites.

In addition to her other efforts, for several years Judge Roby served on the Diversity Committee of the Federal Magistrate Judges Association (FMJA), working to enhance the pipeline of information available to minority bar associations regarding vacancies at the magistrate judge level. Judge Roby currently serves on the governing board of the FMJA and was recently sworn in as the organization's president-elect at its convention in Atlanta. She will assume the helm of this 500-plus member organization in summer 2012.

Judge Roby additionally was requested by the president of the FMJA, U.S. District Judge Royal Furgeson, to serve as the co-chair of the Federal Judges Association's Civic Education Task Force, which is a partnership between the Federal Judges Association, the FMJA, the National Bankruptcy Judges Conference, and other entities for community civics education. The task force's first project will be to produce a Civics Education Toolkit that can be used by federal judges to promote civics education.

Judge Roby's life has many dimensions; she thoroughly enjoys her work and family and realizes that her efforts as a judge are complemented by her family. She has been married for more than 20 years to her spiritual partner and former law school classmate, Clarence M. Roby Jr., who is also an attorney in New Orleans, and she is the mother of two wonderful sons. She enjoys—and occasionally plays—golf. **TFL**

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*Shawna Castells was a law clerk to Magistrate Judge Roby and now clerks for Judge John Steele in the Middle District of Florida.*