



Hon. Nannette Brown

**Judge of the United
States District Court for
the Eastern District of
Louisiana**

by Eura Chang

Chief Judge Nannette Jolivette Brown is chief judge of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana. When she was appointed by President Barack Obama in 2011, Chief Judge Brown became the first African American woman to serve on any Louisiana federal district court. Before her appointment to the bench, she served as deputy mayor and city attorney for the city of New Orleans. The chief judge joined Eura Chang, a recent law school graduate, to discuss, among other things, the important roles of community-building and respect in diversity and inclusion efforts.

Eura Chang: Because it was the Federal Bar Association that brought us together, could you tell us what you have enjoyed about being a member of the FBA, and why you would encourage new attorneys, like myself, to join?

Chief Judge Brown: I was always quite aware of the pressures and expectations of always being the first minority in certain environments, so I knew it was important to be involved in the bar and in the community in New Orleans. The FBA has such a wide variety of ways you can get involved, big and small, and they have such a wonderful reputation with the federal court here. It has evolved tremendously from the association I enjoyed over 30 years ago to the one that I ultimately became president of in 2019. It is so much more inclusive, so much more engaged. It is an organization that I'm so proud to be a part of. Being involved in the FBA has allowed me to grow professionally as well as personally.

EC: Well, you've sold me on getting more involved with the FBA chapter in Minnesota! Earlier in your response, you touched on, I think very humbly, often being the first as a woman of color, but I do want to recognize that when you were appointed by President Barack Obama to the court of the Eastern District of Louisiana in 2011 that you became the first Black woman to be sworn to the federal district court in the state of Louisiana. I'd love to hear more about what you think is the importance of having diverse voices and backgrounds serving on the bench.

CJB: Look, there are a lot of qualified people, and I'm very humbled that I was chosen. When the people that are appointed to do this job are a reflection of the community at-large, that gives legitimacy and confidence to the people we serve. I am the first African American woman [on the Louisiana district court bench] but

I'm also among the first in my family to go to college and to graduate from college. I can tell you that when I look across the bench, I honestly connect with the litigants, the victims, those being prosecuted. My broad and inclusive background allows me to be less judgmental of the things that don't matter and focus on the law. I truly believe that I can connect and understand and listen to everyone no matter their background because mine and my family's is so varied and diverse. It is my job to put all my personal feelings aside and judge based on the merits of their case. I think the diverse experience I have allows me to do that. We don't just want to be objective and fair; we want to appear objective and fair. That is what the law requires! When you look at the bench and there's a variety of people with a variety of backgrounds, it illustrates the many freedoms that we have in this country and the rights and privileges that those of us here are sworn to uphold.

[On building respect in the courtroom]

CJB: I like to ask jurors what we can do better, and I always ask, "Did you feel respected?" I want to know if there were any needs that we did not meet, anything that we were insensitive about. In my chambers, we find this amusing because... ok, have you ever heard of Moon Pies? I provide a lot of snacks because I want to keep the jurors awake, and so once they complained, "Why do you have banana Moon Pies? Nobody eats banana, I need chocolate Moon Pies!" And so, I'm like "Ok! We're fixing it." But we do try to keep connected because you can never sacrifice your service to the public. And to the people who come here and rely so heavily on our system, we want to make sure that our employees understand what this building represents and what our responsibilities are to uphold that.

Things move efficiently [in the Eastern District of Louisiana] because we address our motions promptly and move our docket efficiently, and that's out of respect. Clients and litigants should not be waiting around. It is a sign of respect for the people we serve. Everyone wants to demand respect, but you have got to be willing to extend it. It is a two-way street, and we have to set the tone as judges.

EC: I'm curious to hear your perspective as someone who has had a commitment to diversity and inclusion for her entire life and career. I live in Minnesota, which was the starting place of the uprisings following the murder of George Floyd. We recently passed two years since that summer and the increased focus, including from the FBA, on diversity and inclusion. How do you suggest that we keep this momentum moving forward and make sure that we continue to prioritize diversity and inclusion?

CJB: You really have to know your history and remember defining moments. I remember when I was growing up seeing photographs of Emmett Till that had been published in the African American media. That searing reality sticks with you. The circumstances surrounding his death was our justice system at its worst, and you really can't sweep those things under the rug. Those are the things that we know about, and they represent so many of the things that we don't see. You just can't forget your history and having grown up in the segregated south, I am ever reminded of what happens when we ignore the realities around us, when we stop listening to people, when we separate ourselves on any ground. What makes this country so wonderful is our ability to open our hearts and minds to each other. I benefitted from that sort of open-mindedness as a child myself and I try to teach it to my own children and exercise it in my daily life. But what I'm so proud of is that there was a whole new generation of people in this country born long after me who

didn't live through the Civil Rights movement who saw that moment when George Floyd was killed and knew this is not the country they wanted. They wanted better not just for themselves but for their fellow Americans. We just can't forget those moments because we don't want to backslide. I try not to get too comfortable that I forget those uncomfortable moments. If we don't know the tragic moments in our history, we'll repeat them.

EC: Chief Judge, you are a trailblazer in the legal profession who has opened up a path for many to follow. Do you have any advice for those law students or new attorneys who might be considered the first in their field?

CJB: If you're a lawyer, you know you take an oath. First priority is to serve honorably and abide by that oath. Embedded in that is how you treat people. I would also say to honor your values and don't be afraid to be a changemaker. Sometimes it's so much easier to just go along because it's unpopular to speak out. I know that my presence, my mere presence, can make people feel uncomfortable so I try to work hard at upholding my values and being true to myself and my country by setting an example. If you're in a position to make a difference and a change, then when the opportunity arises, you can't be afraid. There's also nothing wrong with noticing if someone feels like they don't belong. It's important to reach out when people have those feelings, and you should work hard to connect with people. We are more alike than unlike, like Maya Angelou said. When you can gain trust and confidence and when people know and understand that you have the same values, you can really make change. It's much easier to persuade people to do the right thing and think more broadly then.

[On how trailblazing is not about charging forward by yourself, but about bringing others with you]

CJB: Because to be honest, I'm very humbled by that title. I've never thought of myself as a trailblazer. I'm so honored that people see that in me, and when I look around and consider where I came from to be here, it's quite an accomplishment, and I'm very fortunate and appreciate that. There's a point in your life when you realize that it just can't be about you. You can't get to the top of an organization or in the federal judiciary unless you have peers you can confide in and rely upon. Getting to the top is not really blazing and knocking anybody down. I often see that is a misunderstanding that people have. Accomplishing most things requires relationship building, requires gaining the trust and confidence and respect of your peers. You have to be willing to open doors for a peer, to provide some opportunity for someone else, know your own strengths and weaknesses so you can pair up with other people and be stronger and accomplish career goals together. People who really rise to the top have that skill, have that ability, and are inclusive on so many levels. I never thought of trailblazers so literally—people who are actually trailblazers have mastered the way of bringing people on board, gaining their confidence. That's not necessarily what you think of trailblazing, it's probably much more subtle than people realize. You can't get to or stay at the top alone.

EC: I have just one final question—autumn is starting, and I'm curious what upcoming things you're looking forward to this fall.

CJB: Well, it's a new court season, I'm excited about that. In a couple of weeks, I'm going to Tel Aviv, Israel to participate in a delegation in the International Judges' Association, so I'm very excited to interact with judges from all around the world. On a personal level, I'm looking forward to the holiday season because I have such a wonderful support

system in my two children and my husband. October also begins a new judicial calendar, so I look forward to what my docket will be and the precedence from the circuit and Supreme Court. I'm excited about my new law clerks coming on board and what we will tackle next. I'm just looking forward to all those things. ☺



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