



Hon. Ona T. Wang

U.S. Magistrate Judge for the Southern District of New York

by Christie McGuinness



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To know Judge Ona T. Wang is to know that she is a passionate, committed member of the Southern District of New York bench. When you walk into Judge Wang's chambers, you see a hand-drawn scroll containing the phrase (loosely translated): "The law has boundaries that are like a net without edges; thus, it must be tempered with mercy and compassion." It is that sense of creativity and ingenuity that Judge Wang brings to her chambers and cases. Judge Wang's perspective is not all too surprising when you hear about her path to becoming a magistrate judge in the Southern District of New York. Judge Wang received her A.B. from Harvard University before proceeding to Duke University to pursue a Ph.D. in Zoology with an emphasis on animal behavior, ecology, and evolution. Judge Wang had almost completed her Ph.D. before deciding to go to law school. Judge Wang attributes the growth of her "legal consciousness" and shift to a legal career to the fights for reproductive freedom in the 1990s. Simply put, Judge Wang wanted to make a difference and focus on social justice work. With this resolve, she began her law school journey. Beginning with her very first semester in law school, Judge Wang knew that she wanted to be a public interest lawyer or work on impact litigation. Energized by the appointment of the late Ruth Bader Ginsberg to the U.S. Supreme Court and the still recent appointment of the late Sandra Day O'Connor, the women's liberation movement energized Judge Wang. In her first semester of law school, she worked with Joan Bertin and Columbia University's Program on Gender, Science & Law to file an amicus brief in *United States v. Virginia* – the case (in which Ruth Bader Ginsburg delivered the majority opinion) where the Supreme Court declared that Virginia Military Institute's policy of accepting only males was unconstitutional. Judge Wang commented that working on this amicus brief was an extremely rewarding experience that combined her love of science and the law. Later in law school, Judge Wang was a student in Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice and Defender Clinic, where the clinic filed and litigated death penalty postconviction petitions in Alabama state and federal courts.



Upon graduation from New York University School of Law, Judge Wang served as a law clerk to Judge Deborah A. Batts (the first openly LGBTQ+ federal judge). She expressed admiration for Judge Batts' fair and empathetic consideration of all parties and issues who came before her.

Upon completing her clerkship, Judge Wang entered private practice, where she handled civil, regulatory and criminal investigative matters. She also maintained an active pro bono practice, continuing her representation of indigent clients on death row in Alabama. In addition to her own practice, she served as both the pro bono coordinator for the New York Office and vice chair of the Pro Bono Committee of Baker Hostetler – making good on her commitment to do good with her law degree. Her almost 20 years' experience investigating, and litigating habeas petitions would become particularly relevant in her future position as a magistrate judge. Reflecting on her time in private practice, Judge Wang commented that it provided her with an opportunity to develop her writing skills and work a wide variety of issues that were of interest to her. For example, when she was a litigation partner at Baker Hostetler, Judge Wang took on another important amicus assignment – this time in the Fourth Circuit and U.S. Supreme Court.

Pairing with the Human Rights Campaign and filed on behalf of Apple, IBM, Microsoft and other corporations, Judge Wang submitted amicus briefs in 2017 in *G.G. v. Gloucester County*, which advocated for transgender teens' rights. At the same time, Judge Wang was handling other sophisticated commercial matters such as an SEC receivership in the United States District Court for the District of Connecticut and representing the trustee assigned to recover assets arising out of Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme, which were also very meaningful to her. As Judge Wang put it, the amicus briefs, the receivership, and trustee work were good book ends to her legal career, as it was soon after Judge Wang submitted that amicus brief that she began her tenure as a magistrate judge in the Southern District of New York in 2018.

Speaking a bit about how she spends most of her time as a judge, Judge Wang commented that it is divided between managing civil cases, including managing the litigation, getting civil cases through discovery and ready for trial, and settlement conferences and criminal duty. One week every three months or so, Judge Wang takes pleas, holds initial conferences, sets bail or determines detention conditions, and enters various orders and warrants in connection with criminal proceedings and investigations in the Southern District of New York. When asked about whether she sees any similarities between the skills in both the civil and criminal arenas, Judge Wang underscored the importance of recognizing the need for humanity and to see each person for the individual that person is. Whether someone is pleading guilty or making their argument for why they should receive bail, Judge Wang observed that everyone who appears before her needs to feel like they have had an opportunity to be heard and to feel seen by the court. Judge Wang expressed that she remains mindful that a routine encounter for her may be a person's first experience with the justice system and that each person means something to somebody.

When asked about the hardest part of her job, Judge Wang noted that some of her hardest cases are the ones in which someone failed to exhaust administrative remedies or where the statute of limitations bars a case, and an injured person has no legal recourse. Judge Wang remarked that because so many civil cases will not wind up in front of a jury, a settlement conference may be the only time that a litigant gets to appear in front of the court. As Judge Wang puts it, there is so much that goes into the humanity of appearing in her court – making sure (once again) that everybody feels heard and seen.

In addition to expressing an approach to judging that is focused on treating all with respect, Judge Wang emphasized the importance of mentorship throughout her career – from typically being the mentee to her current role of a mentor. Like many former judicial law clerks, Judge Wang began by identifying Judge Batts as a mentor. Judge Wang remarked that Judge Batts was a great sounding board for her throughout her legal career (extending past her clerkship) and served as a mentor

to her and her entire clerk family. Judge Wang further observed that her partners at Baker Hostetler were not only valued mentors to her throughout her time in private practice, but also what she called “sponsors.” When asked what she meant by a “sponsor,” Judge Wang explained that her partners at Baker Hostetler made sure that she was visible and had a seat at the table. Whether it was speaking at a conference or giving a presentation, Judge Wang's partners at Baker Hostetler provided opportunities for her to contribute in a meaningful way and showcase her abilities.

Having benefitted as a mentee of many, Judge Wang now focuses on mentoring others. First and foremost, she serves as a mentor to her law clerks (current and former), providing guidance and serving as a sounding board. In addition, Judge Wang also likes to pay it forward to the younger lawyers who appear in her courtroom by encouraging them to participate in proceedings before her. Laughing, Judge Wang remarked that judges can see when a younger lawyer, who clearly has their pulse on the issues in the case having likely written the briefing, is furiously passing notes to the partner arguing the motion. Judge Wang always encourages younger lawyers to take an active role in appearances with the understanding that more senior attorneys can tie up any loose ends, and she similarly encourages senior attorneys to support that growth of the younger or newer lawyers.

Judge Wang's impact on others spreads far beyond the Southern District of New York. She currently serves on the Federal Judicial Center's Magistrate Judge Education Advisory Committee, having been appointed by Chief Justice Roberts to the post. In that capacity, Judge Wang works with a team of magistrate judges from around the country and Federal Judicial Center staff to develop the curriculum to train new magistrate judges coming on the federal bench. She presents on substantive areas of law and the practice of judging at training programs, and she mentors fellow magistrate judges.

When asked about what she enjoys most about working as a judge, Judge Wang immediately expressed her appreciation for her colleagues. She said that she works with the best group of judges, and she is constantly learning from her peers, not only in her district, but around the country as a result of her committee service.

Outside of work, Judge Wang is an avid water polo player – something she began doing in college. During her time in graduate school, Judge Wang continued playing water polo on a co-ed team, and she later joined a team once she moved to New York City. She has competed in the United States and internationally, even traveling to Paris three times in the last 25 years to compete in international water polo competitions.

Finally, when asked if she had any advice for lawyers who are interested in a judicial career, Judge Wang began by encouraging those who are interested to learn about what the job entails, and to apply (and even noted, at the time of the interview, that there are/will be openings in

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Advice for Visitors to National Parks

When asked if they had any advice for people who visit our National Parks, all three judges had excellent wisdom to share. Judge Bibles said, “Plan your visit carefully and be prepared! Practice the Leave No Trace principles.” Those principles are: Plan Ahead and Prepare, Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces, Dispose of Waste Properly, Leave What You Find, Minimize Campfire Impacts, Respect Wildlife, and Be Considerate of Other Visitors. She concluded, “Most of all, enjoy the Canyon and stay safe.”

Judge Barch-Kuchta advised, “Yosemite comprises over 1200 square miles and welcomes over 4 million visitors each year. To manage crowds and due to reduced Park staffing, the park has instituted a reservation system at various times during the year. Elevation and the dry climate can significantly affect your physical condition and stamina. If visiting, make sure to check the Yosemite Park website for up-to-date weather, road conditions, and attraction information (www.nps.gov/yose).”

From Yellowstone, Judge Hambrick shared: “Please familiarize yourself with some of the rules before you get here, especially regarding the thermal features and the wildlife. Be prepared for large crowds, lots of driving and slow traffic – pack your patience!”

In addition to the excellent, practical advice each judge offered, they emphasized the dedication of the National Parks Service professionals who work day in and day out to make the parks safe for all. As Judge Barch-Kuchta observed, a “NPS Ranger is not only a highly trained federal law enforcement officer but [is] cross trained in life saving and search and rescue in some of the most austere environments where even mules cannot travel. They risk life and limb to rescue climbers from sheer rock faces, campers stranded at remote campsites due to flash floods[,] or lost and injured hikers at high elevations.” The rangers provide these many services despite the same challenges faced by the judges. Therefore, a wise traveler will respect, and hopefully extend gratitude for, the committed service of NPS workers.

National Parks Judges – Dedicated and Adventurous Jurists

From the granite face of Half Dome and rolling valleys in Yosemite, to the thermal wonders and roaming bison of Yellowstone, to the mighty Colorado River flowing through the vast expanse of Grand Canyon, these three dedicated judges protect our natural resources and maintain an orderly and welcoming environment for

visitors from around the world to enjoy. They do so despite tough conditions in remote spaces, and they are as comfortable hiking or skiing in the backcountry as they are managing a busy and unique docket in their courtrooms. And while everyone may not have such grand and breathtaking vistas in their backyards, Judges Hambrick, Barch-Kuchta, and Bibles remind us to take time from our busy lives to appreciate the natural wonder of our world and our nation. It is there for all of us to enjoy! ☺



Judge Alison S. Bachus serves as a U.S. Magistrate Judge in Phoenix, Arizona. Having hiked, rafted, and explored the national parks featured in this article, it has been a joy for her to meet these amazing jurists and learn about what they do on a daily basis. She expresses her heartfelt appreciation and admiration for the service of Judges Bibles, Hambrick, and Barch-Kuchta. © 2024 Alison S. Bachus. All rights reserved.

the Eastern District of New York) and not to be discouraged if the process does not work out the first time around because it is a very competitive process. Judge Wang commented that the Merit Selection Committee values the importance of diversity of experience, reflecting on her own experience of handling both complex civil cases during her time at Baker Hostetler and even handling some criminal matters – something important to her job as a judge.

Throughout her career, Judge Wang has distinguished herself and made a tremendous impact on the parties who appear before her, her law clerks, and her colleagues across the country. The Southern District of New York is honored to have Judge Wang amongst its ranks. ☺