

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from New York Judiciary and Unified Court System. I'm John Caher.

Amici is partnering with the Office of Workforce Diversity to bring you a new series of interviews with Unified Court System staff from diverse backgrounds who play a vital role in helping the court system achieve its goals and mission. The interviews will be conducted primarily by Susan Goodman from the Office of Workforce Diversity.

As always, the Amici podcasts will be available both on the court system's website, and through the iTunes podcast library. Additionally, Q&A articles based on these interviews will be available on the Office of Workforce Diversity webpage.

Today, we offer you the inaugural interview. Susan's guest is Nala Woodard.

Nala has worked in city and state government since 2009. In October 2018, he was promoted from deputy chief clerk to chief clerk of the Albany County Family Court. In this position, he manages the necessary systems and relationships for the court to thrive, including overseeing administration, providing professional staff support and building strong community ties. He also has extensive management experience in the educational realm, working as a consultant, teacher and principal.

Susan Goodman: Nala, you started your career as a teacher and principal. How do you feel that has influenced your current job?

Nala Woodard: I'm always going to give 100 percent to whatever I'm doing, both in the field of education as well as in Family Court. When you take the time to get to know people, it gives you a purpose, a drive for what you do.

I like to step outside of the realm and as I did in education in get to know the families. And the same applies to the court. Sometimes I step from behind the window to see how I can help them. Both in education and in family court, you're working with a family unit, and more specifically with children, and trying to make the best, get the best outcome for the children. I may not be involved directly with the outcome but certainly in making sure that we expedite the process in moving with a sense of urgency the same way I did in education. So, I have, and will always have a passion for helping children and families.

SG: Great. And what three words would you, if you had to choose three words, would you choose to describe your current role? And if you could, also describe or compare to your previous job as a deputy clerk?

Nala Woodard: I would say certainly exciting. It's fast paced, and it's purposeful. And that purpose came naturally moving from the deputy to the chief clerk position, became even more fast-paced, so maybe the one difference is there's certainly more on your plate as the chief clerk from the deputy chief clerk.

SG: So, how would you describe purpose, purposeful, in terms of your current job?

Nala Woodard: I think always referring back to the mission of the courts is where you find your purpose. What is our purpose? It's to serve the people and to serve them in a timely manner, at least as far as the court clerk's function is -- get the petitions in and move them on so we make sure that everyone has access to justice. But really the court has done a great job of laying the foundation of key principles for us to follow to make it easy for us to understand the purpose that we serve. And a lot of time in Family Court, people are visiting us, not because they want to, so making sure that we're sensitive to and compassionate for what they may be going through.

SG: What kinds of things do you mostly see in Family Court?

Nala Woodard: Well, a lot of my interactions would probably be at their point of entry in the court, whether it's their first time or they've been here multiple times. It's usually when they are filing their petitions. A lot of times you see people who are maybe looking for guidance, may have a lot of questions. Some people may be frustrated with the process. Some people may not be as trusting in the process.

And so, with all of that, the idea is to create a court and a system in general where people do have trust in the process. If you are able to meet their frustrations with a sense of calmness, they understand that you are working with them. We do see a variety of emotions or lack thereof in the court and at the front window. But our job is to adjust. We're in a business of not just serving but also customer service. So, our job is to adjust.

SG: Specifically, what kinds of cases do you see?

Nala Woodard: A majority of the cases that we deal with are custody and support. We also have a drug court in Albany County Family Court, and a domestic violence part, and so we're dealing with custodies and guardianships and support-related matters and people looking to file petitions for those. There's a lot more, such as juvenile delinquent petitions. We work closely with county agencies, in our case, Albany County agencies, with filings.

SG: What do you like most about your new job?

Nala Woodard: Overall, I like the ability to effect change, helping people both directly and indirectly and working with a wonderful and dedicated staff.

SG: And, following up from that, what would you say is your biggest achievement to date, personal and professional?

Nala Woodard: If it's personal, it would be my children--not an achievement but just an absolute joy and a pleasure. I'm the father of two. My son is 10 and my daughter is eight. And professionally, I think my joy, or my big achievements, would be in stages from being an educator, both a teacher and a principal was seeing my students from years past graduating from college. In fact, I just yesterday saw one of my students ... I remember most of their names. I remembered her name as well as her mother's name, and knew for sure that she'd been a junior in college so she's finishing, she's on her way to finishing college. But seeing my students graduate from college...She ran right up to me. It was great to know that you have had an impact on a child or a former student and their family.

Another achievement was I worked for the city of Albany as the city clerk, and being the first African-American city clerk in the city's 225-year history, that was a big accomplishment for me. And then, when I became at the age of 26, one of the youngest principals in the State of New York was also a very wonderful achievement for me. So, those are things that I can look back and share with my children but it's just a sense of accomplishment for me which I don't get to share very often.

SG: Absolutely. Those are major achievements. Okay, could you describe a current typical day in your professional life?

Nala Woodard: Usually when I get in, first thing is I check the emails and the voicemails to make sure that everything is caught up and in some cases, there are situations in the morning that you have to respond to quickly, staffing needs being one of them. And shortly after, I make sure that all engines are going in all parts. I will maybe follow up on any notes that I have on my desk from the prior day, prior business day.

Every morning, I do rounds in the court. So, I go out first and check our front window area and greet all of the employees and have quick discussions with them. And then I head out, check the security in the front and I head up the stairs to the waiting area and I do a walkthrough. I check the attorneys' room and peek my head in there, just greeting everyone and then I walk through the waiting area.

I do my rounds just to get a feel for the culture, for the environment in the court each day. And it's always nice to make myself available and visible to people if they have questions or issues. A lot of times, it's attorneys or the court attendants that may have questions. Then, I walk back down through all chambers.

I prefer not to be behind my desk, but a good portion of the work that I do is behind the desk—emails, meetings as well, both impromptu as well as meetings that are scheduled.

Strategizing about the best direction of the court, is something I think about several times a day. Which direction do we want to go in and who are the necessary people to be involved and what if any systems are needed?

And really, no two days are alike. You spend a lot of time fielding questions from staff on files and petitions and how to proceed with those. And I deal a lot with that. My door's always open to my staff, and they come in and make inquiries throughout the day.

SG: Would you say you have somebody who you consider a mentor? And if so, why?

Nala Woodard: There's so many people. First and foremost, all the judges have lent a helping hand to me, and that's been great. I think probably since I've been in this new position but also in the past, I've had three individuals that have really stepped up and helped me. In our district office, our Deputy District Executive, Christy Bass, has really made herself available to me and offered to assist me in any way she can. We also have a Chief Clerk in Ulster Family Court, Elaine Stinemire, who's also made herself available to me and my staff. She's been helpful. As well, Tony Walters, director of the Office of Workforce Diversity, has been so helpful in making himself available in any way necessary, and believing in me as well. The district office has just been very supportive. So, it's been great. I mean, it's really like a big family. A lot of people have contributed.

SG: If you had to advise a prospective applicant to the court system, what would your advice be?

Nala Woodard: Well, I would say the court is a great place to work, hands down the best place I've ever worked. What you invest in the court system, in my opinion, is what it will invest in you. It's not just about doing nine to five, but really understanding what our purpose is. I think that the court system is a great system. It's fantastic in my mind because what you invest, you reap the benefits of, even from simply knowing that you've helped to provide relief or make a difference in someone's life, even in an interaction or a smile from someone who may be coming in. You really have the power and the influence to change people's lives, and it's a great place to work. And at the end of the day, I would say never lose focus of the purpose of being here, which is to help and serve the people, bottom line.

SG: Good words. One last question. Before you leave this position, which hopefully is a long time-

Nala Woodard: Very!

SG: In the future, what would you like your greatest achievement to be?

Nala Woodard: I think my greatest achievement would be knowing that we dealt with one person at a time to make a difference. That's my philosophy, period.

My greatest achievement overall would be to leave the court in a better condition and a better place than it was handed to me. I don't mean to suggest it wasn't handed to me in a great condition, but it's my job to take the lead, do my best to contribute, whether that means handling the petitions in a timely manner, making sure everyone is trained, to leave the court in better hands than I found it. That would be a goal of mine no matter where I go, to leave the organization better than I found it, to have known that I contributed, whether it be in the morale of the court, whether it be in the procedures, systems...That would be my greatest achievement, knowing that I made a difference and left the court in a better place than I found it.

SG: Very inspiring words. So, Nala Woodard, Chief Clerk of the Albany Family Court, it's been a pleasure talking to you and I thank you very much for this time that we've had to get to know you and your work, your very important work.

John Caher:

Thanks for listening to Amici. You can find all of our recent podcasts on the court system's website at www.nycourts.gov, and most are also in the iTunes Podcast library. If you have a suggestion for an Amici podcast, please let me know. I'm John Caher, and I can be reached at 518-453-8669, or jcaher@nycourts.gov. In the meantime, stay tuned.