

DIVERSITY

Dialogues



Nala Woodard, recently promoted from deputy to chief clerk of the Albany Family Court has worked in city and state government since 2009. As chief clerk, 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:

Both in education and in family court, you're working with a family unit, and more specifically with children, and trying to get the best outcome for them. I may not be involved directly with the court's outcome but certainly in making sure that we expedite the process by 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:

What 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, which is even more fast-paced, so maybe the one difference is there's certainly more on your plate as the chief clerk.

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

Nala Woodard: 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 a point of entry in the court, whether it's litigants' first time or they've been here multiple times. You see people who are looking for guidance. Some people may be frustrated with or not as trusting in the process.

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

Nala Woodard: A majority of the cases 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.

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, both as a teacher and a principal, was seeing my students from years past graduating from college. In fact, very recently I 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 on her way to finishing college. It was great to know that you have had an impact on a child, on former students 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, that 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 need to respond to quickly, staffing needs being one of them. And shortly after, I make sure that all engines are going in all parts.

Every morning, I do rounds in the court. So, I go out first and check our front window area and greet all 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 court attendants that may have questions. Then, I walk back down through all chambers.

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. 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 are 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. 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. And 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. I mean, it's really like a big family. A lot of people have contributed.

SG: If you had to advise a perspective 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. You really have the power and the influence to change people's lives. And at the end of the day, I would say, never lose the 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 the best possible hands.