

John Caher:

Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York Judiciary and Unified Court System, I'm John Caher. Today's program is another episode of "Diversity Dialogues" with Susan Goodman. Today, Susan's guest is Tamara Kersh, the Chief Clerk in the Queens County Supreme Court.

Susan Goodman:

So, thank you for joining us, Tamara. I just wanted to begin by laying the foundation. What three words would you use to describe your current role?

Tamara Kersh:

I think my current role is one in which I'm very busy, multitasking a lot and a manager of the operations of the court system here in Queens Supreme Court.

Susan Goodman:

And can you tell us what that involves to a degree?

Tamara Kersh:

Well, as the Chief Clerk in Queens Supreme Court, I am actually in charge of the daily operations of two court houses, one located in Jamaica and the other located in Long Island City. So, as part of my day, I come in and access what's on the calendar that day, what we need to do, if we have any issues or meetings or things like that. I try to make sure everything is running as it should, you know, smooth operation, if there are any issues to address them, anything that needs special attention, and address it before it becomes a problem.

Susan Goodman:

Can you give us an example?

Tamara Kersh:

For instance, tomorrow there's a matter on the calendar in which one of the individuals can be erratic in his behavior, so I'm already looking at the calendar ahead of time to see what the calendar looks like. If we can have him called in when there are less people in the courtroom,

so he impacts less people. I understand that he's upset about what is going on and that's one of the things that you have to manage also, dealing with people who are upset. But I want to ensure that whatever his experience is, it does not impact other people.

Tamara Kersh:

In the course of working every day, we have to deal with individual employees also and different situations that they may be encountering. And so, it may cause us to make changes in the assignments. Maybe an employee is not feeling well that day, or maybe an employee has some issue in their family that they need to address. So, there are different things that we do during the day, and you have to multi-task and you have to be flexible, you have to pivot on a moment's notice.

Susan Goodman:

So, pivoting to diversity, how would you say you encourage people to honor their uniqueness?

Tamara Kersh:

One of the things I like about being in this job is that it has allowed me to see people's individual strengths and things that they bring to the table. My grandmother always said, "People are the sum total of their life experiences." So, different people experience different things. I like to get to know the employees. I like to know something also about their life as well. Getting to know them helps me to assign them to places where they flourish, and helps me to assign them to places where they really address the needs of the individuals—the diverse individuals who come into the court as well. So, it plays to both strengths, the employee's and the needs of the public.

Susan Goodman:

And how would you say that specifically impacts the minority population?

Tamara Kersh:

Well, you have to be aware of certain cultural issues because you want to provide quality service to everybody, you never want to demean anyone. And so what you want people to know is that what is different and unique about them, is different and unique. It doesn't mean it's right or it's wrong, it's just different and unique. And so, we try to find out and understand how we can assist them. And that means that we have to sometimes ask questions. We have to have a dialogue with our employees as well as the people who come in to the court, to understand. Even something as simple as a speech pattern may be very different. You may be saying one thing and a person is interpreting it as something else. So, when we have people who really understand and represent the diversity of the court, it helps to have a comfort level

with those we're serving.

Susan Goodman:

And what would you say your biggest achievement to date is, personal or professional?

Tamara Kersh:

I think professionally the thing that I am most proud of would have to be being appointed to the Chief Clerk position. When I became the Deputy Chief Clerk, there was a move within the court of administration to have a greater push towards diversity and promoting people who maybe hadn't been promoted before. And so, becoming the Deputy opened my eyes to a lot of different things that maybe I hadn't seen in the court that we needed before, because I only saw the court from maybe a smaller perspective. But when I became the Deputy, I started attending meetings. I started getting out more and walking the court and seeing the different departments and that's when I realized that we had so much that we could do with our staff that would promote greater diversity and also would make people coming into the court feel very comfortable.

When you come into the court you have to realize that people are coming in because something is going horribly wrong in their life. So when they come in, they have to feel comfortable with whom they're speaking to. That's the only way we can assist them. I encourage the employees to bring their unique talents and their experiences to the table, because it does help us to provide greater service to people of diverse backgrounds. We have people here who, as hobbies, they've learned how to sign. This was something they were interested in, that's something we may need at a moment's notice.

So, if somebody comes in, if I don't know that I have somebody that can sign, then I'm denying that person or delaying what the person came to court for, because I can't service them. So again, that's why I say, the uniqueness of our employees helps us to serve a diverse population in Queens. Queens is very diverse. I told somebody one time, "If you got to different parts of Queens, it's like you left the country, but you never went anywhere." You can go to any country and still be in Queens, because it is so diverse, and I love that about Queens.

Susan Goodman:

If you can combine these two questions, what do you like most about your new job, and how

would you describe a typical day?

Tamara Kersh:

Well, what I like most about my job is that I get to be the change that I hoped for. I get to see things that need to be changed and I get to put that in place, and to see it develop and grow. And when I say that I mean, again going back to the employees and how we provide service and the different things that we do, but it's also more than that. You get to see a person who comes into the court and maybe they have a negative impact about the court, but through your interaction with them, they leave feeling better about the court. They may not be 100 percent satisfied with the outcome, but they will understand it better.

What's the typical part of the day here? There is no typical part of the day, because although you plan your day in your mind, it never quite goes the way you think it's going to go? That goes back to when I'm saying you've got to be flexible and pivot on a moment's notice. What I like to do typically is I like to come in, get myself settled, and look at things I need to do. I actually send myself a to-do list every night for the next day. I come in and I get started on my list and sometimes by the time I get to the third item on the to-do list, something has come up that needs immediate attention. So, then I still have the flexibility to prioritize and go back and do things as they need to be done. I do like the fact that I can impact the court in a positive way with change, and I also like the fact that I'm never bored. You're never bored in this job.

Susan Goodman:

That's wonderful. And do you have any people that you would consider mentors? And if you do, can you talk about why and how they've impacted you?

Tamara Kersh:

I've been very fortunate that I have met wonderful people along this journey in the court system and I've met people who have really encouraged me a lot. Serena Springle is the person who definitely comes to mind. Serena is the Boroughs Chief for Manhattan Civil Court. Serena and I met years ago and she's just one of those people who's always encouraged you. She would say, "Oh, you could do that. You could do that." You know, everybody who knows her, she calls everybody "Boo." She'll say, "Boo, you can do that." She always encouraged me, even when I had doubts in my mind, she would say, "Trust me! Trust me! I wouldn't tell you to do this if you couldn't do it." Renee Jones is another person who has mentored me, and in fact trained me when I started in the court system. Renee is the Principal Court Clerk in charge of the Mental Hygiene Department.

Susan Goodman:

And with Renee, do you have any specific mentorship role that she played that you want to account?

Tamara Kersh:

Well, when I came into the court system, Renee actually is the people who trained me. And so, when I first came in, you know, I was nervous about the job and I wanted to do a really great job. Renee sat me down and said, "Take your time, look at what's happening. Take it in what's happening, and then you can decipher how you need to proceed." You know, she always said to me, "A calm worker is the best worker" because you're focused on what you're doing, you know what you need to do. She said, "When you get frazzled, you lose sight of where you're trying to go." And so, I've always tried to maintain that approach.

Susan Goodman:

And what would your words of advice be to those who are either in the court system now, or who wish to advance within it?

Tamara Kersh:

Okay. Well, so, those persons who are looking to enter into the court system, I would encourage them to take every test that they can. I came in through testing through the civil service system. I would also familiarize them with the court web page, where they could actually see job postings for positions that do not require taking a test. There are two ways to come into the system, and I would encourage them to avail themselves of whichever system they believe would benefit them, and they're qualified for. And the two systems are not mutually exclusive.

You can test and you can apply for appointed positions. So, I would encourage them to really familiarize themselves with the court system. For those persons who are already within the court system, again, we have the two roads you can travel to advance. You can go through the competitive test taking system, as well as the appointments. The appointment system. I would encourage people to be able to advance themselves by soaking up as much information as they can. Knowledge is power.

When you apply for positions, you need to go in the room and have the knowledge that would make you be the candidate that whomever is hiring would pick. So, what I've always told people, and this is something that I live by myself: If the job description requires you have to do A and B, I've never just done A and B, I've always wanted to know C, D and E as well. Because that would help me later and it helps me to assist people now, doing the additional task helps me understand what I'm doing and where the job is going.

So, I encourage people to learn as much as possible and to not be afraid to apply for positions and show that they have the knowledge. Don't be afraid that you won't get the position and so you say, "I'm not going to apply." I have read books and I've listened to people speak, and they said, "that what successful people have something in common, is that they failed at many things prior to obtaining their success." So, I think by trying, even if you're not successful the first time, it gives you more experience. I would tell people just try everything and continue to try and never get discouraged.

Susan Goodman:

How long have you been in the job that you're in now?

Tamara Kersh:

I have been in the job just slightly less than five years.

Susan Goodman:

So, obviously it's going to be a long time from now, but before you leave the position, what would you like your greatest achievement to have been?

Tamara Kersh:

I would definitely like my achievement to have been that I impacted people in such a positive way that the things that I've instilled in them becomes an institutionalized way of handling matters. And when I say institutionalized, I don't really like that word so much, but I would like to say more of a standard operating procedure. I want people to be treated well and provided with the information that they need.

I want people to feel comfortable when they come in the door, to not be afraid. So, I'd like what I impart to people for them to pass it along to other people and hopefully it will have a better impact and leave the court in a better position than when I started in 1991.

But, the other thing that I'd like to say is that when I leave the court system, I'd like to see is that we're no longer saying, "Oh, that's the first African American woman to get that position." "That's the first Hispanic person to hold that position." I want it to be the norm that people

feel free to apply for positions regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, etc. and that the work force of the court system be as diverse as the population they serve. If you're the first to be appointed to a position, it certainly is an honor and a privilege to be the first, but you don't want to be the last.

John Caher:

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