

# DIVERSITY

## Dialogues



### One-on-one with Tamara Kersh

Chief Clerk, Queens County Supreme Court

#### ON DIVERSITY:

**The uniqueness of our employees helps us to serve a diverse population in Queens. You can go to any country and still be in Queens, because it is so diverse, and I love that about it.**

Susan Goodman: I want 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 manger of the operations of the court system here in Queens Supreme Court.

Susan Goodman: And can you tell us what that involves?

Tamara Kersh: 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. And I try to make sure everything is running as it should, you know, and if there are any issues, to address them, anything that needs special attention.

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 a challenge, so I'm already looking at the calendar ahead of time to see if we can have him called in when there are fewer people in the courtroom. I understand that he's upset about what is going on and that's one of the things that has to be managed. But I want to ensure that whatever his experience is, it will not impact others.

In the course of working every day, we have to deal with individual employees and the situations that they encounter which may cause us to make changes in 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. You have to multi-task and 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 about their lives. Getting to know them helps me to assign them to places where they can flourish, and where they can really address the needs of the diverse individuals who come into the court. So, it plays to both strengths—the employees' 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. So what you want people to know is that what is different and unique about them is not about right or 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 dialogue with our employees, as well as the people who come in to the court. It may be something as simple as a speech pattern. 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 increases the 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 greater push towards diversity in the courts 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 before, because I only saw the court from 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 more comfortable.

When people come in to the court it is because something is going horribly wrong in their life. It's important that they feel comfortable with whom they're speaking. 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, and that's something we may need at a moment's notice.

So, 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. You can go to any country and still be in Queens, because it is so diverse, and I love that about it.

Susan Goodman: If you can combine these two questions, what do you like most about your 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 change in motion, and see it develop and grow. You get to see a person who comes into the court and maybe they have a negative impression, 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? Is funny, there is no typical part of the day, because 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. I send myself a to-do list every night for the next day. And I come in and I get started and sometimes by the time I get to the third thing on the to-do list, something has come up that has changed it. But then, as the manager, I have to prioritize. I have the flexibility to prioritize and go back and do things as they need to be done. 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 Borough Chief for Manhattan Civil Court. We met years ago and she's just one of those people who's always encouraged me. 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." And even when I was not so sure, she would say, "Trust me! Trust me! I wouldn't tell you can do this if you couldn't." 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: With Renee, do you have any specific mentorship role that she played that you want to account?

Tamara Kersh: When I came into the court system, Renee was one of the people who trained me. I was nervous and I wanted to do a really great job. Renee sat me down and said, "Take your time, look at what's happening. Take 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 so 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: Those who are looking to enter into the court system, I would encourage them to take every test they can. I came in through testing in the civil service system. I would also familiarize them with the court web page (**insert url here?**), where they could actually see job postings for positions that are not testing. There are two ways to come into the system, and I would urge them to avail themselves of whichever they believe would benefit them, and they're qualified for. 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. It's the same for those who are already with the court system. I would also say to soak 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 says 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 it helps me understand what I'm doing and where the job is going.

So, I encourage people to learn as much as possible and 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. You know, experts say that successful people have something in common, and that's that they failed at many things prior to their success.

So, I think in the trying, even if you're not successful that 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: That I have impacted people in such a positive way that those people pass it down, so that the things that I've instilled in them become an institutionalized way of handling things. 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.

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." "That's the first African American man to get that." I'd like it to be, that's just the norm. You remove that word "first." If you're the first, it certainly is an honor and a privilege to be that, but you don't want to be the last.