

## **Interview with Judge Lewis Douglass by John Caher on April 28, 2016**

John Caher: On the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission, the co-chairs, Justices Troy Webber and Shirley Troutman, and Executive Director Mary Lynn Nicolas-Brewster, are releasing excerpts from oral history interviews with several of the pioneers who helped create and establish the Commission.

The oral history interviews were conducted in connection with a new PBS documentary on Franklin H. Williams.

In this initial episode, we'll share some insights from Judge Lewis Douglass, an historic figure in his own right who was a founder and chair of the Commission.

I'm John Caher, Senior Advisor for Strategic and Technical Communications,

John Caher: I'd like to start off by asking you about your own personal experience as an attorney and a judge of color back in the bad old days, and how people like Franklin Williams paved the way and why a Commission like this Commission was even necessary?

Judge Douglass: Well, when you talk about the bad old days my mind goes back to 1960, '61 and the civil rights struggles throughout the country and here in New York City. I didn't come into the court system until 1978. I think at that time our primary concern was the paucity of Blacks in the system, paucity of Black judges. I remember the first Black judge to be elected to the Supreme Court. We were also concerned about the number of Blacks who worked in the system in various support positions—court officers and clerks. I think our goal then was to increase the number of Blacks in the system. We were also concerned because that was roughly four or five years after Attica, so there was a general concern about the fairness of the criminal justice system.

Black judges would come together, in fact we formed an organization called the Judicial Friends, to discuss these issues. What do we do to make the system more fair to minorities? What do we do to increase the number of minorities in the court. That was a continuing conversation among us.

John Caher: What experiences did you have, personally, before that?

Judge Douglass: In terms of my career?

John Caher: Experiencing discrimination, bias, anything of the sort.

Judge Douglass: I don't know that the Black judges who were in the system experienced any personal ... There's some isolated stories that I could tell you, but I don't know

that the concern was that the judges were not being fair, not being properly treated. The concern was increasing the number of minority judges so that the system now appears to people to be more fair, to reflect the full community, and increase the number of support staff for the same reason.

I remember a meeting we had, and one of our issues was when you went into Family Court the entire lobby staff was white court officers, and we talked about how intimidating that might be, particularly to poor people, uneducated people who are having terrible problems managing their children, about to lose their child. Now when they get to Family Court, which is supposed to resolve these problems, their first impression was all white office staff in the lobby.

At that time it was common place for the court officers to be more aggressive, to treat the people who came into the court with a lack of respect. I can remember court officers yelling, "Quiet that baby!" or, "Put that newspaper down!" How the court officers treated the people who came into the court was a concern at the time. There are isolated stories about judges being mistreated because of race, but I don't think that was the dominate concern.

John Caher: Why don't you tell me one of those stories of a judge being mistreated?

Judge Douglass: Sometimes, some judges, some Black judges would feel that the court officers would not respect or defer to them as they would do to a white judge. I think early on it was a particular problem, I sensed, with how court officers related to Black female judges. They simply would not treat them, respect them, as they would respect their white colleagues.