

Interview with Hon. Rose Sconiers by John Caher and Joyce Y. Hartsfield, June 7, 2016

- John Caher: Welcome to the latest episode of a brief series of oral history interviews with the trailblazers and pioneers who were instrumental in establishing the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission. The recordings are excerpts of interviews conducted in preparation for a documentary on Ambassador Williams. In recognition of a 30th anniversary of the Commission, the co-chairs, Justices Troy Webber and Shirley Troutman, and Executive Director Mary Lynn Nicolas-Brewster, decided to post excerpts that describe the early days and the challenges of the Commission. Today, we're joined by Justice Rose Sconiers who eventually became Chair of the Commission. I'm John Caher, Senior Advisor for Strategic and Technical Communications.
- Justice Sconiers: I was appointed to the Commission back in the 80's. Lew Douglass was the chair at that time. Judge Kaye was the Chief Judge and I received a phone call—I was in City Court— asking me to serve on the Commission. And of course, I said yes. At that time, I did not know pretty much what the Commission did, but I was delighted that I was asked to serve on the Commission and I've been on the Commission 20-plus years now.
- John Caher: Why did you want to serve on the Commission? Was it, was there a problem you thought needed to be addressed?
- Justice Sconiers: Well, there's always a problem. There's always a problem in terms of minorities getting opportunities rather in the court system and the legal system. So when I realized what the mission of the Commission was, I suddenly was eager to be a part of it. And certainly being from Buffalo, we had a lot of problems in terms of getting minorities in the pipeline. So I was delighted to be able to bring voice to that particular problem.
- John Caher: What were the problems specific to Buffalo?
- Justice Sconiers: Just that we did not have a lot of minorities in the system, in the court system, and there was not a real recruitment program going on. If you knew someone, you could tell them about the particular position, but in terms of getting them into the court system was another chore. So I really wanted to be an advocate for minorities and getting them within the court system.
- John Caher: So this report opens a whole bunch of Pandora boxes, or as Franklin Williams said, uncovered some wounds and that now it's your job or the

Commission's job to dress cells. So, what did you do in terms of implementing the recommendations of the Commission and improving, improving the myriad problems that the report identified?

Justice Sconiers: Okay. Let me just start in terms of what we did to implement the report. When I came on board back in the 1980s, of course I was the only upstate representative. I would go to all the meetings in New York City and try to have a voice for upstate. We took on many, many projects. We did many conferences, seminars, really tried to let the court system know about the Commission. That was one of the biggest problems, getting people to realize that we were in existence. And once they realized that they came to the Commissioners with their particular problems, their issues, and we would take those on and try to resolve them.

John Caher: What sort of problems did they come to you with?

Justice Sconiers: Problems in terms of promotional aspects, problems in terms of trying to into the court system. Because, you know, we also try to help people that were not a part of the court system, but were trying to get entry into the court system, in terms of publicizing job announcements, recommending friends to the court system, there are a lot of problems with court stenographers, problems with interpreters. There are a number of problems that we really took on as a Commission and tried to resolve. And here again, at this time I was just a member. I was not the chair.

John Caher: Judge Douglas suggested that there was part of the problem was I guess, insidious and that maybe almost there could be a discriminatory effect without a discriminatory intent. And I think what he meant by that, I think, is that a lot of the hiring went on. People hired managers within the court system and who did they hire? They hired people they knew, people who recommended to them by people they knew, and there was a very, very strong likelihood that that would be white people. So is that something you overcome, that's something you addressed a heightened sensitivity to this, to this sort of thing.

Justice Sconiers: I think we did. I think we did address those problems. Here in Buffalo, we have a system where there are a number of relatives working within a particular court system. So it was insidious throughout the entire court system. And of course, because we don't have a lot of people at the table then of course you cannot get your friends all into the pool. So that was the whole purpose of getting more people at the table so they can recommend their friends and also push for them and try to promote them within the system.

John Caher: What have you learned about Franklin Williams, if much of anything in the ensuing years or while you were working on the commission?

Justice Sconiers: The legacy is that we have a Commission that now is really proactive in terms of trying to promote minorities, trying to recruit minorities and certainly keep them within the system. And thanks to the Chief Judges, the ones that I worked with, Chief Judge Kaye and Chief Judge Lippman, they were very, very, very supportive. And I think, you know, it starts at the top, the leadership has to set the tone in terms of getting people to kind of try to do the right thing. So I think the legacy is that we have a Commission that's active and hopefully the Commission will be in existence for many years to come because there's still a need.