

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Hon. Norman St. George

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York courts. I'm John Caher.

Today, we have a special guest for our Diversity Dialogue segment, the Hon. Norman St. George, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for the Courts Outside of New York City. Judge St. George manages the day-to-day operations of trial level courts in 57 counties outside of New York City, and that includes over 640 state paid judges and more than 6,000 nonjudicial employees.

Judge St. George's judicial career began in 2004 when he was appointed and then elected to the Nassau County District Court. He was subsequently elected to Nassau County Court and Supreme Court.

Before ascending ~~of~~ to the bench, Judge St. George practiced tax law, served as an Assistant District Attorney, ran his own law firm, served as a managing partner of another firm and, along the way, gained experience in a wide array of criminal, commercial and civil matters. Judge St. George, a graduate of Hofstra University School of Law, was appointed Deputy Chief Administrative Judge in August 2021.

Judge, thank you for your time. Let's go back to your roots if we could. Where did you grow up? What was your childhood like? What did your parents do? Who are your early role models and heroes?

Judge St. George: Well, good morning, John. Thank you for having me. I'm delighted to spend some time chatting with you this morning.

The story starts in and on a small island in the Caribbean Jamaica West Indies. My father grew up in Old Harbor, a small fishing village, and he came to this country on a track and soccer scholarship back in 1956. It's an immigrant story. He had no money and this was his chance to make a better life for himself.

And so he came here on this track scholarship to a college in the Midwest. His inspiration was a poem by Henry Longfellow: "The heights by great men and women reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but they, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night." He repeated that over and over to himself. When I was born, he repeated it to me. When my two daughters were born, I repeated it to them.

And so he met my mother, who was from the Midwest of European background, and they fell in love. And ultimately after college, they both moved to the Bronx and I was born in the Bronx and lived there until I was five. And then my family moved to Long Island for really, for school purposes, to the Roosevelt Freeport area. At that time, that was a place where minorities were welcome to purchase a home.

My father always believed in education; he went on to get three Master's degrees, a Doctorate degree from Columbia and became a psychiatrist. And my mother was a school guidance counselor in the Long Beach school district. And so I went to public schools until sixth grade. And then one day, I was in the junior high school, local junior high school, and I asked my father if I could ride my bike to school. And he asked why, and I said, "Because you're able to ride your bike to each class." I had seen people riding their bikes in the hallways.

He was flabbergasted.

And so, a week later, I was in a private high school, Long Island Lutheran High School, which was an amazing place.

In terms of role models, my father was my biggest role model. He believed that education was the key. He was a student of Nelson Mandela, and so he was one of my role models. I did an extensive report on Nelson Mandela and apartheid. Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world." So my father was my biggest role model — incredible work ethic, worked three jobs.

Now, I was born three days after John F. Kennedy was assassinated and have always been, as a result, fascinated by his words and his life and fascinated by the Kennedy family and the [Robert F. Kennedy] comment that, "You see things the way they are and ask why, and I dream things that never were and say, why not?" And I always wondered what it was like for my mother to be giving birth in a few days after the president is assassinated.

John Caher: How did your father's immigrant experience shape your worldview?

Judge St. George: That's an interesting question. I think that his belief, coming to a foreign country, was if you got educated and you worked hard, you would succeed and achieve. And so that is basically what he instilled in me. And that's my view of the world, frankly.

John Caher: That's wonderful. That's terrific. Now at Adelphi University you majored in accounting. How did that evolve into the study of law?

Judge St. George: The study of law was based on brainwashing. With a father from a foreign country, you have to be a doctor or a lawyer, period. There's no other choice. I did great in biology in high school, and I was considering becoming a doctor. If I was a doctor, I'd be a surgeon. But I found in high school that I just did not like the sight of blood. So that was the end of my career, or my proposed career, as a doctor.

So my plan was go to law school at that point. But my father did say that I should, and everyone should, always have a backup, a safety net. And so that's why I studied accounting, because that was my safety net. I could get a degree in accounting, get a CPA. And so that's what caused me to major in accounting. I was always interested in business.

I'll tell you, I tried that same brainwashing on my two daughters. They're 10 and 12. And I said, doctor? Lawyer? and my older daughter, Alexandra, we used to say, "She's going to be a lawyer. She'll be a lawyer." So I took them on a trip a couple years ago to Boston, took her to Harvard and I said, "This is a phenomenal law school, Harvard Law School!" I bought her the shirt, I bought her the hat. She had always said she wanted to be a lawyer for years before that.

So, a woman walks by and says, "Oh, that's cute. You want to be a lawyer and go to Harvard Law School?" And to my surprise, my daughter said, "No, I don't want to be a lawyer, and I don't want to go to Harvard Law School."

I said, "Lexi, you don't want to go to law school? You don't want to be a lawyer?" And she said, "No, no, daddy, I don't." I said, "Well, what do you want to be?" And she said, "Well, I want to be an engineer and I want to go to MIT." And so I said, "MIT's right down the block. We'll get back in the car. We'll go see MIT and we'll get the hat and the shirt from MIT."

So, what I've learned is flexibility. My father was not flexible. I handle it a little differently. So, I'm flexible. That's what she's interested in, so I support her in that.

John Caher: But your children are still benefiting from the lessons your father taught you about education.

Judge St. George: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yes.

John Caher: Now you've been a judge for, gosh, 20 years, I think. How did you position yourself to have that opportunity?

Judge St. George: I have to admit, I didn't position myself to be on the bench. I knew ultimately, being a judge was a pinnacle of the legal profession, and at some point, I would want to become a judge. But my goal was to be the best trial lawyer possible, to be able to try any case at any time, whether it was criminal or civil, and to represent clients to the best of my ability. So I positioned myself to do that.

Interesting footnote on the accounting degree. As I was graduating from law school, Arthur Andersen, one of the big accounting firms back in the 1980s, came to the campus and recruited me. And they said, "You have an undergraduate in accounting. We'd like you to come work for us in our tax law department." And I really was underwhelmed by that, but they indicated that I would go on audits and I would get my CPA and they would pay for me to get an LLM in tax. And the salary was unbelievable.

So, I took a shot and I worked for Arthur Andersen for a year and I realized I was just doing tax returns, and my goal was to be a trial attorney. So I left Arthur Andersen and I went back to the firm that I had interned with during law school and asked them if I could be their associate. They weren't hiring at the time, and what I said to them was, "Maybe I can just sit in your conference room. I need to have a place to go. And then you can send me on per diem work." And so that actually turned into it an associate's position, and I would go to any court— Family Court, Supreme Court, Criminal Court— and handle matters. The only setback was only partners were able to try cases, and that was not satisfying to me. So I left that firm and joined the Nassau County District Attorney's office because I knew I would be trying cases every day. So, the "positioning" was to be the best trial attorney.

When I left there, I was a senior prosecutor, and then I became a partner in a Wall Street law firm where I handled civil litigation and was the managing partner. Ultimately, I started my own law firm and I had heard that locally—this is in Nassau County— they were looking for candidates for judge. I went to my mentor, who was one of the partners in that first law firm that I worked for, and that opened the doors to me becoming judge, but not within the timetable that I thought. I thought it would be many years later, 10, 15 years later. But when the window opens you jump through the window because you don't know if the window will open again. And so now 18, 19 years later, I'm still on the bench.

John Caher: It sounds like you were able to do that without really a political base or a political rabbi. Is that right?

Judge St. George: Yes. Yes. And back to education, work hard and merit, and that has opened doors for me.

John Caher: Hmm. So hard work and merit can, at least in some cases, trump political connections or sidestep them, anyhow?

Judge St. George: Absolutely. Absolutely.

John Caher: Now, how'd you get into administration? You've been an administrator for, oh, I don't know, seven or eight years, I guess, since Judge Prudenti appointed you as a Supervising Judge in Nassau County, I think the District Court. Why were you interested in administration? It seems like you like trial work. I imagine you like being a trial judge. So why would you want to be an administrator?

Judge St. George: I actually did not. And Judge Prudenti, who was the Chief Administrative Judge, absolutely was phenomenal. And she's doing a phenomenal job at Hofstra Law School, which is obviously my alma mater. I only wanted to try cases as an attorney. And I only wanted to try cases as a judge. And as a District Court judge, I would average 46 trials a year.

John Caher: Wow!

Judge St. George: I wanted to stay on trial. I thought that that was the most important thing that I could do as a judge, to get people to closure on their cases. The only reason there wasn't 52 cases a year is we have six weeks' vacation that we have to take. So I never even considered administration at all, frankly. Although I was managing partner of my law firm, that still allowed me to try all of the cases that I wanted to try.

So back then, and this was probably 2013, the Administrative Judge, Judge Anthony Marano, who happened to have been one of the first judges that I tried cases before as a young Assistant District Attorney back in 1991, saw in me something and encouraged me to get involved in administration. And I have to tell you, it was a hard sell because I still wanted to try cases. And frankly, I thought I still would be able to try cases.

And that's why I put my name in the hat to be considered as a supervising judge, was appointed and then realized very quickly that the ability to try cases was very slim. So, I set up an old case part and all of the old cases in

the District Court would come to me and then I would send them out for trial, and theoretically could keep them for trial, but that really never happened because it was extremely busy—26 judges, over 300 non-judicial employees.

So it wasn't a goal, but once I started doing it, I saw the need. It was challenging. I loved trying cases, but I had gotten to the point where the actual trial of the case wasn't challenging, I loved doing it, but it was, call your witness, bring in the jury, let's read the verdict... What I found in administration was day-to-day, minute-to-minute, there was a challenge. And so that is what piqued my interest back in 2013. And that's just expanded since then, having been the Administrative Judge of Nassau County for three years and now the DCAJ. It's expanded exponentially in terms of responsibility and workload. But as I said, it's expanded my ability to be challenged, which is something I enjoy.

John Caher: Your DCAJ duty sounds like a tale of two states, actually a tale of about 12 states. I mean, you preside over an astonishingly diverse and eclectic region. You've got major cities like Buffalo and Albany and Binghamton, and the most rural areas of the state, and your home on Long Island. All of these are very, very different places. What are the challenges to administering such a large and diverse area of different cultures, different traditions, different needs, different politics, different practices? How do you do that?

Judge St. George: You have identified all of the challenges. Those are the challenges.

The first challenge is the geographical distance. It's a massive, massive state, massive distance. And so you have to come up with, in terms of handling the distance, a game plan and a strategy. It was my goal to visit all of districts outside of New York City in the first 30 days, which I was able to accomplish. We basically cut the map up into two days in two districts. So, I flew into Buffalo and I spent the day in Buffalo and then went to Rochester from Buffalo. So that's the Eighth and the Seventh Judicial Districts, then Syracuse and Binghamton, Sixth and Fifth. I did, on a separate trip, the Third and the Fourth. I have an office in Albany, and I spend half the week in that office. So Albany is the Third Judicial District. And the Fourth Judicial District is about an hour and half north. And then the other half of the week, I'm in Long Island, which gives me access to Nassau, Suffolk and the Ninth Judicial District, which is centered in Westchester.

There's a culture of upstate versus downstate, and initially there was a view that someone from downstate couldn't relate to upstate. Now, Long

Island is considered part of upstate because it's outside of New York City. So we have inside New York City and outside New York City. And so that is a matter of traveling to those areas and being seen and being present and discussing matters throughout the state to overcome this upstate/downstate mentality.

When you connect with people, you gain their trust. You listen to them. I think that's the best way to overcome those cultural challenges and the geographical challenges. The other thing is you have to be flexible. If the goal is X and you go upstate, and they're nowhere near X in a certain county, then you work with them. You put a plan together to get them to that point. Many things are not going to happen overnight.

Finally, you need a great team because I can't do it all myself. I have a great team in my office in Albany. I have great chamber staff here in Nassau County. And then the Administrative Judges throughout the Third District through the 10th, including the Presiding Justice of the Court of Claims—amazing, amazing administrators, amazing people. One thing my predecessor, Judge Caruso, was able to accomplish through the pandemic is all of us met as Administrative Judges every day, virtually, and we really established a family. And so working with these Administrative Judges is almost like working with the family. And so the ability to come together, discuss and address all the needs through the state is also accomplished by working with a great team.

John Caher: It sounds like a whole is greater than the sum of its parts story.

Judge St. George: Absolutely. Yes.

John Caher: Now, the Chief Judge has always made diversity and equal justice priorities in her administration, and perhaps more so after the Jeh Johnson report showed that we have a long way to go. What is the role of a DCAJ in implementing her vision and her mission?

Judge St. George: Imagine that you suspect there's an issue and you bring an outsider in, a stranger, and give that person complete reign of inquiry to analyze and report. That means you really want to get to the bottom of the problem and resolve the problem. And so, Secretary Johnson—well respected, esteemed scholar—came in and really took our system apart and took the court system to task and identified major areas of concern, which we are working on.

We're working on his recommendations every day. I am working on it outside of New York City. Inside New York City, Deputy Chief

Administrative Judge Kaplan is working on the recommendations. We work every day with Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Mendelson, who is phenomenal. The job is to implement all of the Chief Judge's directives, missions, goals, working with Chief Administrative Judge Marks. And so that's what we do every day.

Also, we also represent the districts to OCA— "What do the districts need?" So it's a dual role. It's working with all of the districts to implement the Chief Judges' directives. And it's also discussing with the Office of Court Administration the needs of the different districts. As you know, the Excellence Initiative has two parts. One is quality services to all court users. And the other is to have matters handled effectively, expeditiously and efficiently. Diversity and equal justice is paramount. It's an urgent priority given the report. And I have to tell you, the report was tough to read and tough to digest the fact that in the 2020s—this is not the sixties—in the 2020s we're still struggling with these issues.

I went to an exhibit in Ulster county a few weeks ago regarding Sojourner Truth. And really, I did not know the entire story of Sojourner Truth. I knew generally about it and I've studied it since then.

She came into our courts in Ulster County in 1828 for equal justice, to get the return of her son who was sold into slavery in Alabama. And she received equal justice and she received the return of her son, 1828. And to say that now in 2021, 2022, we still have these issues. It is disappointing, but the Jeh Johnson report has given us a roadmap and it's encouraging.

We see changes on a day-to-day basis. And I'm excited to be involved in the changes in our court system. We have to roll up our sleeves, have difficult conversations and make changes. One of the big changes is zero tolerance, and I think it's important. And the Chief Judge has established that there's zero tolerance in terms of issues regarding bias. So, we have our work to do. I'm encouraged and invigorated and energized to assist in doing that work.

John Caher: Are you the first DCAJ of color outside of New York City?

Judge St. George: Out of New York City, yes. Yes, I am.

John Caher: Now, do you think your background, both racially and as the child of an immigrant, provides you with a different perspective?

Judge St. George: Absolutely. Absolutely. I think how you grow up and what you're exposed to always colors how you see the world and gives you a different perspective.

My parents used to send me to Jamaica instead of going to summer camp when I was 8, 9, 10, 11, I would be sent to Jamaica to spend time with my grandmother in Jamaica, West Indies. There was no electricity, no hot water. So we have everything that we know here and we accept and expect, but when you, at the same time, juxtapose that on saying, "There's no hot water grandma." And she says, "We have hot water. Wait until the sun is high in the sky. It'll heat the pipes." And waking up for the ice truck to come by to get a block of ice, to put in a box, which is an ice box, and then to go shopping for food, all of that, all of that gives you perspective.

I believe I'm able to relate in some way to everyone and anyone. And I think that makes a difference when you are attempting to work with people and gain trust and respect. I can always find something in common. When I go upstate to small towns, I can relate to small towns. I worked in a law firm in the city. I can relate to the city. I lived in the suburbs. So, I think all of that is important. And you know, the way you grow up absolutely affects how you see the world.

I would say that, moving forward, the theme of my administration I would like to be excellence and opportunity. And so following up on the poem that I read to you— "the heights by great men and women reached and kept"— that's how I want to move forward in this position.

John Caher: And what a wonderful way to move forward. Thank you, Judge.

Judge St. George: Thank you.