



HON. ROSE H. SCONIERS  
CHAIR

## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

**In this issue we recognize the diversity of judges within New York City Surrogate's courts and the recent appointment of the first African American Public Administrator in Westchester County.**

The Surrogate's court is responsible for the probate and administration of estates, as well as handling guardianships and adoptions. The judge in Surrogate's Court is referred to as "Surrogate" and each county has its own Surrogate. Populous counties, like Kings and New York may have more than one Surrogate.

The Public Administrator is primarily responsible for managing estates where the heirs are not readily identified. Each county has a Public Administrator.

The articles featured include Surrogate Nora Anderson, New York County; Surrogate Diana Johnson, Kings County; Surrogate Nelida Malave-Gonzalez,

Bronx County; Surrogate Rita Mella, New York County; and Surrogate Margarita Lopez Torres, Kings County.

These Surrogates reflect the diversity in the Surrogate's courts of our state.

Surrogate Rita Mella is of Dominican ancestry. Surrogate Malave-Gonzalez and

Surrogate Marguerite Lopez Torres are of Puerto Rican heritage. Surrogate Nora

Anderson and Surrogate Diana Johnson are of African-American ancestry.

Marguerite Holmes is the first African-American appointed as the Public Administrator of Westchester County. The careers of these women share the common thread of hard work, dedication and a commitment to public service.

We also recognize the recent appointments of Judge Jenny Rivera and Judge Sheila Abdus-Salaam to the New York State Court of Appeals. Their prior experience has shown them to be adept and persuasive writers with the ability to analyze and resolve complex legal issues.

In the upcoming months, the Commission will focus on increasing the pipeline of judges of color in communities outside of New York City. On November 8, 2013, the Commission, in conjunction with the Monroe County Bar Association, the Rochester County Black Bar Association, and the Women's Bar Association will sponsor a seminar on "How to Become a Judge." Please refer to our web page at [nycourts.gov/ip/ethnic-fairness](http://nycourts.gov/ip/ethnic-fairness), for further information. ■

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## SURROGATE NORA S. ANDERSON

**In 2009, Nora S. Anderson was elected a New York County Surrogate.** Judge Anderson was raised in Virginia with her mother, a teacher of humanities, and grandfather, who practiced law. They instilled a sense of fairness and justice in young Nora.

Surrogate Anderson's day includes presiding over calendar call, hearings and attending meetings. She thrives on the challenges brought on by new issues and is greatly stimulated by the judicial decision-making process.

Surrogate Anderson believes one's success in life depends largely on the ability to listen and effectively communicate with others. She tells those who work hard that they "will be noticed and remembered," also advising people not to take criticism personally, but to learn and grow from it.

Initially, Surrogate Anderson pursued a medical career, studying microbiology at the Harvard School of Public Health after her graduation from Hampton University. However, she soon realized that her natural abilities were best suited for the legal profession. She received her law degree from Brooklyn Law School in 1982.

Surrogate Anderson brings a wealth of legal experience to her position. Serving as a trial attorney with the Legal Aid Society provided her "a great foundation in trial practice"; clerking for the Honorable Albert P. Williams, New York Supreme Court, Criminal Division, allowed her the opportunity to view the courtroom from the other side of the bench. Surrogate Anderson was also in private practice, specializing in employment discrimination and later in trust and estate planning. Additionally, she served as a Deputy Clerk and then a Chief Clerk in Surrogate's Court, New York County.

Surrogate Anderson advises law students and novice attorneys to compile a diversified resume, encouraging law students to discern which areas of the law most interest them by participating in law clinics. She also urges law students and attorneys to work in a variety of legal settings, both in the public and private sectors, so that they are well-rounded. "Use every opportunity to learn more," she states.

Surrogate Anderson is committed to diversity within the courts and legal profession and believes it is critical that members of New York's bench and bar reflect the rich mosaic of our State population.

Surrogate Anderson is dedicated to ensuring that New York County Surrogate's Court is an effective resource for litigants and responsive to the varied needs of those it serves. She states, "It is important that if you want your day in court, it is available. The Court is here to resolve disputes thoughtfully and expeditiously."

## SURROGATE RITA MELLA

**Rita Mella is honored to serve the people of the State of New York in her new capacity as Surrogate of New York County.** Elected Surrogate in 2013, she views this position as an opportunity to make a difference in people's lives. Surrogate Mella, who was raised in the Dominican Republic, credits her hardworking parents for instilling in her a strong work ethic and commitment to public service. She is the first person of Dominican descent to serve as a Surrogate in New York.

Upon graduating from college in the Dominican Republic, Surrogate Mella received a scholarship to attend the University of Florida, where she earned her master's degree in Latin American studies. After graduating from the University of Florida, she moved to New York City, settling in the Washington Heights community.



Surrogate Mella was moved by a "community in crisis" as she observed her neighbors struggling with housing, immigration and other vital issues. Believing she could make a positive change in people's lives by becoming an attorney, she focused on public interest law. While attending the City University of New York (CUNY) School of Law—from which she graduated in 1991—she worked on various public interest projects and assisted a law school professor on research relating to asylum for immigrants who were victims of domestic violence.

Although she is grateful for the legal skills acquired while working for a private law firm specializing in criminal defense, that experience solidified her desire to pursue public interest law. She joined the Unified Court System in 1993, working as a court attorney and later a law clerk for the Honorable Richard Rivera, of Kings County Family, Civil and Supreme Court.

Upon Judge Rivera's passing, she worked with Honorable Margarita Lopez Torres—then a Civil court Judge who went on to become a Kings County Surrogate. In 2007, Surrogate Mella was elected to New York City Civil Court, serving in New York County until her election to the Surrogate's Court bench.

Surrogate Mella has been collaborating with minority bar associations to plan a seminar, with the goal of increasing diversity among those comprising the list of eligible candidates for court-appointed fiduciaries. Aware that attorneys of color may not be as exposed to Surrogate's Court practice as they are to other areas of the law, Surrogate Mella hopes to create a CLE program to inform attorneys of color about the functions and duties of the various departments comprising Surrogate's Court. She also seeks to strengthen the Court's internship program to help achieve greater diversity.

Offering some words of wisdom to those looking to bolster their careers, Surrogate Mella advises to be open to new opportunities. "Challenges make you a stronger, better person," she states.

Surrogate Mella is eager to work to alleviate the concerns and issues of the Court's litigants and committed to enhancing the Court's accessibility. "We are here to serve the public," she emphasizes.



## SURROGATE NELIDA MALAVE-GONZALEZ

**In 2013, Nelida Malave-Gonzalez was elected a Bronx County Surrogate.** As Surrogate, she presides over court hearings on matters of probate and administration, guardianships, adoptions and other miscellaneous matters.

The youngest of eleven children, Surrogate Malave-Gonzalez is of Puerto Rican descent and grew up in Bronx County. Her parents provided a structured, loving environment, teaching Nelida the importance of hard work, persistence and patience. Raised in a housing project where neighbors looked after each other and elders were always referred to as “Mr. and Mrs.,” Surrogate Malave-Gonzalez describes the Bronx as the “best kept secret” because of the kindness and resilience of its residents.

Surrogate Malave-Gonzalez did not let the naysayers impose on her what they saw as limitations of a disadvantaged Hispanic girl. “You have to go beyond your comfort zone and push yourself in order to grow,” she states. With education as the vehicle to reach her goals, she vowed to focus on her studies no matter what was going on in her life, earning a bachelor’s degree in business marketing from Fordham University in 1985.

While working at the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, she understood the power of advocacy and the importance of balancing the interests of consumers and business owners. Viewing a legal career as a way for her to help empower those in her community, she earned a law degree from the City University of New York (CUNY) School of Law in 1991.

Surrogate Malave-Gonzalez attributes her “yearn for learning” to her professional success, including her years as an Administrative Law Judge for the New York City Environmental Control Board and as an attorney at a general practice law firm. In 2005, she was elected to the New York City Civil Court bench, serving in Bronx County until her election to Surrogate’s Court.

Surrogate Malave-Gonzalez strongly values communication and teamwork. She also believes it is critical to acknowledge employees for their efforts. As Surrogate, she works to fairly and effectively respond to the needs of those served by the Court. She states that “This Court belongs to the people of the Bronx. Most people visit the courthouse during highly stressful periods in their lives. It is vital that everyone who walks through our courthouse doors seeking assistance is treated with the utmost concern and respect.”

## SURROGATE DIANA A. JOHNSON

**Diana A. Johnson was elected Kings County Surrogate in 2008.** Born in Texas, Surrogate Johnson was soon on a path to success, thanks to the wisdom and values regularly imparted by her strong, loving parents and maternal grandmother.

Although her parents struggled, they always conducted themselves with grace and dignity, teaching Diana to always maintain her high aspirations. Witnessing racism as a youngster in Texas, Judge Johnson quickly developed a strong sense of justice and fairness, deciding at the age of seven that she wanted to be an attorney.

After her family relocated to Brooklyn, New York, she attended the City College of New York and earned a law degree from New York Law School. After graduating from law school, she worked at the Department of Housing and Community Renewal. She also was employed by DC 37, where she gained vast trial experience and was promoted to supervisory attorney of the housing unit. “You must have a sincere desire to help people in order to have a successful career in public service,” she says.

Surrogate Johnson served as a New York City Housing Court judge from 1991 to 1995, and as a New York City Civil Court judge from 1995 to 2000, managing large caseloads and interacting with people from all walks of life. She encourages law students to volunteer in the lower trial courts, where case volume is high and many of the litigants are unrepresented. “The lower trial courts provide a very good training ground for law practitioners,” she states. Surrogate Johnson subsequently served on the Kings County Supreme Court bench.

Surrogate Johnson notes that it was during her election campaign for the Kings County Surrogate that she became aware of how unfamiliar people of color are with Surrogate’s Court, which handles matters involving trusts and estates, guardianships and adoptions. “Typically, people who appear in Surrogate’s Court are experiencing some of the worst times in their lives. They are extremely vulnerable, yet must try to navigate a system they don’t understand,” says Surrogate Johnson, whose goal is to make Kings County Surrogate’s Court as user-friendly as possible.

Surrogate Johnson believes that public confidence in the justice system is linked to accessibility and transparency, and that it is critical for all members of the public to see their faces reflected in the system. She urges people of color in the legal profession to be accessible to those in the community, in order to engender the public’s confidence in our judicial system. “The public needs to know that there is diversity in the courts and that their voices are being heard.”





## SURROGATE MARGARITA LOPEZ TORRES

In 2005, Surrogate Margarita Lopez Torres made history as the first woman of color to serve as a judge in Kings County Surrogate's Court. Born in the southwestern part of Puerto Rico, her family migrated to the United States of America in hopes of a better life for the family.

Surrogate Lopez Torres' youth personifies the African parable, it takes a village to raise a child. Growing up in East New York, she recalls her mother telling her that she was more than her surroundings and could go beyond the boundaries of her neighborhood. She also recalls an elementary school teacher that demanded excellence, and

taught her the joy of reading. Her horizons were further expanded by community and high school programs such as the Upward Bound Program started by President Lyndon B. Johnson, where she was exposed to the Arts, and a Kingsborough Community College program. In High School, it was a "store front lawyers program" that led Judge Lopez Torres to choose the law as a way to meet what she describes as "her social responsibility."

After graduating from Rutgers University School of Law, Surrogate Lopez Torres worked as a legal services attorney servicing Spanish Harlem and the Lower East Side. She describes her experience working with the vulnerable in those communities as a "wonderful privilege and responsibility." Since 1992, she has served as a judge in Civil Court, Family Court, Criminal Court and now in Surrogate's Court. As a Surrogate, she deals with issues of probate, administration, adoptions and guardianships of children. In an effort to increase the number of attorneys of color practicing in Surrogate's Court, the Surrogate's Court has offered a course in Accounting and invited members of the minority bars. She has also participated in a Surrogate's Practice seminar geared toward attorneys of color.

Surrogate Lopez Torres says, "Promoting diversity in the courts goes to the principles of Democracy. If people feel that they are left out they will not respect the laws. It is important to have different backgrounds and perspectives on the bench."

She refers to women as great multi-taskers who rise and meet the challenges of their many different roles. Surrogate Lopez Torres has a passion for justice that will continue to be her guiding light.

## PUBLIC ADMINISTRATOR MARGUERITE HOLMES

In February 2013, Marguerite Holmes was appointed the Public Administrator (“PA”) for Westchester County, becoming the first African American to hold this position.\* Ms. Holmes first joined Westchester County Surrogate’s Court in 2006 as the Deputy Public Administrator.

The Public Administrator’s office is responsible for administering the estates of persons who die without a will when there is no one else eligible to serve as administrator or executor of the estate. Ms. Holmes refers to her office as the “fiduciary of last resort,” where she and her staff “put together the pieces of a puzzle.” Whether she is talking with appraisers about the value of real property, attending the opening of a safety deposit box, or negotiating a small estate settlement, her day is busy and varied.

Ms. Holmes, who grew up in the southern part of Bronx County and graduated from the prestigious Bronx High School of Science, was a formidable student with a passion for reading. Her mother was a strong proponent of education and always encouraged Marguerite to excel in school. Ms. Holmes acknowledges her mother, also crediting the Bronx High School of Science—which urged excellence in all you do—as laying the groundwork for her success.

Ms. Holmes holds a Bachelor of Science degree from New York University. It was while working as a health educator at Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital that she fully realized the role that strong interpersonal and communications skills can play in moving projects forward and achieving positive results.

Later, as a tax accountant at Coopers & Lybrand and a fiduciary tax administrator at US Trust, Ms. Holmes was inspired to pursue a law degree in order to better advise her clients. She earned her law degree from Brooklyn Law School in 2004.

Ms. Holmes attributes her interest in Surrogate’s Court matters to her participation in clinical internships at Surrogate’s Court in Kings and Westchester counties. She recommends that law students engage in clinical internships to become familiar with different areas of the law. She also suggests that law students network, volunteer and seek out mentors as part of their professional development.

As Public Administrator, Ms. Holmes hopes to raise public awareness about the duties of her office and also educate people with regard to proper estate planning, including the importance of having a funeral and burial fund.

Ms. Holmes is a strong believer in collaboration and will be working closely with her staff to ensure the proper administration of unrepresented estates. She emphasizes, “It is by sharing information and knowledge that we grow as individuals and achieve goals that benefit our organizations and society. We must ensure the success of each other.”



\* Take Note that Ethel Griffin, an African American woman has served as the Public Administrator of New York County since 1998.

## RECEPTION FOR RECENTLY APPOINTED COURT OF APPEAL JUDGES— HON. JENNY RIVERA AND HON. SHEILA ABDUS-SALAAM



HON. ROSE H. SCONIERS

**On July 30, 2013**, the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission (“Commission”) and Columbia Law School Association co-hosted a reception honoring Judge Jenny Rivera and Judge Sheila Abdus-Salaam on their appointments to the New York State Court of Appeals. The reception occurred at the Jerome Greene Hall, Drapkin Lounge, at Columbia Law School. Columbia Law School Dean David Schizer welcomed attendees who included judges and attorneys from the courts, and alumni of Columbia Law School. Justice Rose H. Sconiers, judge of the Appellate Division, Fourth Department and Commission chair, provided introductory remarks for Judge Abdus-Salaam and Ariel Belen, former judge of the Appellate Division, Second Department and Commission vice-chair, provided remarks about Judge Rivera.



HON.  
SHEILA ABDUS-SALAAM



HON. JENNY RIVERA

The New York State Senate confirmed Judge Rivera’s appointment to the New York State Court of Appeals on February 11, 2013. Judge Rivera is a graduate of New York University School of Law and she received her Masters of Law from Columbia Law School in 1993. The Senate confirmed Judge Sheila Abdus-Salaam to the New York State Court of Appeals on June 20, 2013. She is a graduate of Columbia Law School having received a Juris Doctorate in 1977. ■



HON. ARIEL BELEN



DEAN DAVID M. SCHIZER



HON. SHEILA ABDUS-SALAAM AND  
HON. GEORGE B. DANIELS



HON. ARIEL BELEN, NADINE JOHNSON, ESQ., HON. JENNY RIVERA,  
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LIEUTENANT EUGENE JORDAN AND  
HON. SHEILA ABDUS-SALAAM



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