

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York Judiciary and Unified Court System. I'm John Caher. Today's program is another episode of Diversity Dialogues with Susan Goodman. Today, Susan's guest is Lakisha Hickson, the Chief Clerk in the Westchester Supreme and County Court.

Susan Goodman: So let's begin with a general question about how you would describe your current role. Do you have three words that you would use to describe your job, and if so what are they?

Lakisha Hickson: Yes. Of course. I think the first thing that comes to mind is I would say busy. Every day in the role of Chief Clerk brings new adventures, you know. We have to come in with an understanding that everything will be completed before quitting time, but just being able to prioritize and meet those deadlines is a daily goal.

Number two I'm going to say important. You know, just managing all aspects of the court, everything from the courtroom to the broom closets, everything in between. It calls for a daily review of priorities, making necessary adjustments, and just being current with the law and procedures, managing our standards and goals, pursuant to our chief judges' Excellence Initiative. These are pretty important factors that we have to weigh in.

Susan Goodman: Can you talk a little bit more about the Excellence Initiative?

Lakisha Hickson: With the Excellence Initiative, we have to manage our standards and goals and measure how our cases are disposed. So, part of our role here is to constantly monitor these cases and just make sure that we're all on track for disposal within the guidelines that are provided — reviewing case data, running reports and seeing where we're at, calling in cases that are further out, cases that are just like hanging around with no court appearance, bringing parties in, just to make sure we stay current.

The third thing I would like to say is, it's rewarding. You know, when you're in a position like this, you know, I can mentor those that are possibly on the same track. I find it very rewarding when I can share a story or someone can ask me, "Hey, how did you become a Chief Clerk?"

Susan Goodman: So how did you become a Chief Clerk?

Lakisha Hickson: Well, I kind of came up the tracks, as they say. I took promotional exams starting with the Senior Court Clerk exam. I passed that and then I passed another one to become an Associate Court Clerk. And from there, hard work paid off and I was appointed to an Assistant Deputy Chief Clerk position and, again, just working really hard until I was able to be appointed as a Chief Clerk. So just, hard work, really. You know, paying your dues, putting in your time, always just working hard. Not to be seen but just to work and be compassionate to get the work done and somehow that was noticed.

Susan Goodman: And then from going into the idea of diversity since that's the crux of what we're talking about today. What is your definition of diversity? How would you describe it?

Lakisha Hickson: Well, diversity is having an office or a court where people come from different backgrounds. We are all different from one another but we have the same work ethic and goals when it comes to making a productive atmosphere. Just being respectful of each other and not being offended by the way others may look or the way they dress or the holidays that they celebrate, you know.

Susan Goodman: And how do you personally encourage people to honor the uniqueness of each individual?

Lakisha Hickson: Well, first off, I like to lead by example. So I would just encourage others to be respectful of each other. Religions and the way someone may dress or, you know, just being supportive when they have events that may celebrate or honor something that's different from my own. You know, just to hear and be supportive of that event and help out where I can.

Susan Goodman: Can you give some examples of ways that you encourage diversity?

Lakisha Hickson: Well, we may have an event where we're celebrating a holiday that may not be my own. I would encourage staff to attend, just make some leeway where we can provide coverage so that they can attend an event that may be going on in the building to celebrate something.

Susan Goodman: Going back to your role, what would you say your biggest achievement is to date, professionally or personally?

Lakisha Hickson: I would have to say making Chief Clerk would have to be my biggest professional achievement.

Susan Goodman: How long have you been Chief Clerk?

Lakisha Hickson: Almost two years now. That's an honor, you know. So I consider that my greatest achievement by far in the workforce—just being able to be recognized for the hard work that I've done, being able to get to this place and still be the same Lakisha I was when I was a Senior Court Office Assistant, you know. It's an achievement to me just to be approachable by all for someone to say, "Oh, that's just Lakisha, she worked really hard. She made Chief Clerk." That's the greatest achievement to me.

Susan Goodman: Can you describe a typical day in your vice as a Chief Clerk?

Lakisha Hickson: Well, no day is the same as you can probably tell. But I like to check in with the staff just to see if there's any pressing issues in any department, touching base with the managers to see what they're working on, to see if there's any

assistance that they may need, just staying current with my emails. As you can imagine, they're coming in all the time. Just reviewing case data and reports again — that takes us back to those standards and goals and making sure that our cases are on the right track. Reviewing notes or preparing for upcoming events that we may be working on or that may be coming up.

Susan Goodman: And what do you like most about what you do?

Lakisha Hickson: I like the interaction that I'm able to have with all staff. You know, when I was a clerk, you're just confined to your courtroom and you only have the interaction with those that come into your courtroom. But being outside of the courtroom now, I appreciate the interaction that I can have with not just the clerks but the interaction that I can have with chamber staff, with court officer operations, outside agencies. I appreciate the limits that are now taken off of me from when I was a clerk. I appreciate the positive changes that I can offer when I see something that could be of the betterment of our court.

I like being able to help people, especially those that others would find difficult. I find it a rewarding feeling when someone that may come to one of our counters or would call in and may seem kind of angry and at the end of our conversation feels like I helped them, or it feels they're not as angry as they were when our conversation first started. You know, I like that about my job, that I'm able to take that difficult person and be able to help them, so they don't feel like, "Oh, I called the court and no one was able to help me." Well, you know what, you got to speak to the Chief and I'm going to help you.

Susan Goodman: That's wonderful. Can you talk about mentorship and who might have been a mentor to you along the way and why?

Lakisha Hickson: Oh, mentors are very important, and I've had quite a few. And let me just put a spotlight on my prior court, New York City Civil Court. I had quite a few there and I'll just shout out some names. So from Civil Court I had Eddie Valdez, Serena Springle and Alia Razzaq. These three individuals poured into me as a Junior Manager, let's just say a supervisor and, you know, just by watching how they work and how they interact, they were all senior titles to me and I appreciate the time that they put in to say, "Hey, Lakisha, you know, you may have handled something this way but the situation comes around again why don't you try this approach?" You know, with just giving me little tips and pointers and ideas and, you know, I'm very thankful for them. All that information they poured into me the nine years I worked there I find incredibly rewarding.

: Here in my current court I'm thankful that I have Nancy Berry, she was the former Chief Clerk and now she's the District Executive. She would kind of be in my mentor role. She's the person that I call now to run something by, and I feel that we all need that. In return, I try to be that for someone else.

Susan Goodman: And how would you advise prospective applicants either who are outside the court system or those who wish to advance within it?

Lakisha Hickson: Well, don't be afraid of hard work, would be the first thing I would say. Don't be afraid to ask questions, especially when you're in a lower title. Ask me what I do. Ask me how I've come to that decision. Don't be afraid to think outside-the-box. I'm always encouraging others to think about this. Your work ethic is always going to follow you. Always leave the greatest impression you can when you're working with someone or in a department. And when it comes to promotional tests, study, study, study.

Susan Goodman: And before you leave this position which hopefully will be a long time, what would you like your greatest achievement to have been?

Lakisha Hickson: Yes. Long time! Before I leave this position I would just like to be remembered as someone that worked really hard and with compassion. Having all staff, judicial and non-judicial staff, feeling supported by me and feeling that I've led this team.

John Caher: Thanks for listening to Amici. You'll find all of our recent podcasts on the court system's website at www.nycourts.gov and most are also on the iTunes podcast library. If you have a suggestion for an Amici podcasts, please let me know. I'm John Caher and I can be reached at 518-453-8669 or jcaher@nycourts.gov. In the meantime, stay tuned.