

Promoting Diversity in the Court System: Betty Matondo John

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

For today's Diversity Dialogue segment, we're going to close out Caribbean-American heritage month with Betty Matondo John, secretary to Associate Justice Sylvia Hinds-Radix of the Appellate Division, Second Department. Betty's roots are in the Island nation of Barbados.

Betty, welcome to the program.

Okay, so here we are at the tail-end of Caribbean American heritage month, which the House of Representatives adopted 15 years ago to recognize the significance of Caribbean people and their descendants, and the history and culture of the United States. By way of reference, there are about 4.4 million Caribbean immigrants in the United States, which accounts for about 10% of the nation's 44.5 million immigrants.

So, your mother came here as an immigrant from Barbados. Why did she want to come to the United States?

Betty Matondo John: Well, she wanted to come to the United States for a higher education, because at the time, there were very limited choices in Barbados and the United States obviously had more options for her.

John Caher: Where did she go to school, and did she have to work her way through school?

Betty Matondo John: Well, yes, she had to work her way through school, but she attended Columbia University and she did a work study program there. That's how she was able to work through school.

John Caher: I see. And then how was she able to remain in the United States?

Betty Matondo John: My mom came to the United States on a student visa back in 1957 and because of the work study program that she was doing through Columbia, she was able to work at New York Hospital/Cornell University. That organization sponsored her to get her green card. She continued with the work study program, also working at Harvard University/Mass General Hospital and eventually was able to get her citizenship.

John Caher: It sounds like she worked very, very hard to get it.

Betty Matondo John: She did. She really did.

John Caher: What sort of values or what sort of a role model or example was she for you?

Betty Matondo John: My mom is my hero. She always has been, she always will be. She raised me as a single mom, but she also had a lot of help from my aunts and uncles because it always takes a village to raise a child. She's actually the youngest of eight children, and about five of them had emigrated to the United States. But they all played a role in raising me and they have all made me who I am today. But what my mom specifically instilled in me was the importance of a good education and a very strong work ethic—always put in 100% if you want to get 100% back out.

John Caher: Where did you go to school?

Betty Matondo John: I received my associate's degree in business from Kingsborough Community College and my bachelor's degree in business management and finance from Brooklyn College.

John Caher: How and when did you come to work for the court system?

Betty Matondo John: I started to work for Justice Sylvia Hinds-Radix in January 2005, right after her election to the Supreme Court. The judge and I actually have a lot of mutual friends, and a couple of them who are very close to her told me, "She's looking for a secretary. You would be perfect for that." I was looking to get out of my previous job and it just worked out. I interviewed and she loved me and that's it. She was born in Barbados and I'm second generation from Barbados, so that's another connection that she and I have.

John Caher: Do you do anything special to honor your heritage? For instance, are there any traditions from Barbados or holidays or customs that you carry on?

Betty Matondo John: Well, growing up, every summer, I went to Barbados. My mother sent me to Barbados from the day after school ended to the day before school started. So, I was always there for Crop Over, which is their carnival, which is the end of July to beginning of August. So, I've always celebrated that.

Back here in the United States, I honor my Caribbean heritage by the music I listen to, the food that I cook at home. And as a family, we've always celebrated holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter with

big family dinners, and that's something that would be always done in my family. And we always, of course, acknowledge Barbados independence, which is on November 30th every year.

John Caher:

Now, you work in Brooklyn, which is one of the most diverse counties in probably the country, really. Let me throw out some statistics from the 2010 census.

About a third of the population is white, about a third of the population is black, about 19% is Hispanic or Latino, about 13% is Asian, and about 37% of the population is foreign-born.

The Second Department Appellate Division, it seems, is almost like an international court in terms of the broad diversity of people who come before it. How does that diversity manifest itself on the job?

Betty Matondo John: In some ways, diversity in the workplace can be a blessing, but in other ways, not so much.

You're talking about a place where you have people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures, who work together on a daily basis. We have judges and law clerks who hear cases and make decisions based on the law. You also have the back-office staff and officers who deal with the public. But they all come to work with their personal beliefs, and in some cases, their prejudices.

That can be a good thing, but it's not always a good thing, because I feel like, given the times that we're living in right now, people feel like it's okay to act in ways that are not always appropriate. So, we have all of these people here, and although most people don't let their beliefs color their decisions and their actions, you always have that small percentage of people who do. And that's what we end up seeing more of.

John Caher:

You're dealing with people who see the world in 100 different ways.

Betty Matondo John: Exactly. And sometimes it's not always for the best, but the people that I directly work with, the judges that I've worked with...My judge sits on the Appellate Division and I think that their diversity helps to bring decisions that are well-rounded and thought out. Like, for example, on the Appellate Division, it's a group of four people, four judges who hear these cases. And then they go into what they call consultation to decide how they want these cases to be decided. I'm sure I've never been able to sit in consultation because that's obviously private and closed doors, but I'm sure that there are arguments so that everyone gets their points across.

But that's where the diversity comes in. My judge, as a Caribbean American, may not view a case the same way as her white counterpart, who is Italian. So, I think that that diversity is helpful, but it's not helpful when people use their beliefs and their prejudices for evil.

John Caher: I suppose that while diversity can be used to bring people together as a beautiful mosaic, it can also be used to tear people apart.

Betty Matondo John: Yes, exactly.

John Caher: Do you think your own experience and your own diversity helps you to understand issues like that perhaps better than someone else?

Betty Matondo John: I wouldn't say "better" than someone else, but I think that because I grew up in a Caribbean family, a strong Caribbean family, I have the ability to understand people from other cultures. I have always been very open-minded when it comes to other people and their beliefs. I may not agree with you, but I'm not going to lash out at you because I don't agree with you. So, I think, yes, I think that my experiences have given me that ability to understand people and to understand that everyone is different, and there are differences of what makes each of us unique and special. And if everyone just understood that, you wouldn't have some of the things that are happening today, because everyone is different and there's nothing wrong with being different.

John Caher: I guess no group is immune, no member of any group is immune, from a "my way or the highway" mindset, or a "my culture or no culture" mindset.

Betty Matondo John: Right, they should be, but a lot of people aren't. And they feel that it's their way or the highway, and that's not how the United States was built. It's just not. It's not how the world was built.

John Caher: I think what you're saying is tolerance is a two-way street.

Betty Matondo John: Definitely is, tolerance and understanding.

John Caher: Betty, that's a great piece of wisdom, and I appreciate your time. I hope you enjoy these last hours of a Caribbean-American Heritage Month.

Betty Matondo John: Thank you so much. And you do the same.

John Caher: I certainly will.

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 you'll also find a transcript of each interview. If you have a suggestion for an Amici podcast, 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.