

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Randy Bowens

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

For today's Diversity Dialogue segment, we are honored to welcome to the program a first-time guest, Randy Bowens, the Statewide Equal Justice Coordinator. Randy, who came to the court system after an early career in banking, and then worked for the Appellate Division, Second Department, Attorney for the Child program, joined the Office for Justice Initiatives last year to help Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina Richardson-Mendelson implement the recommendations of the Jeh Johnson report.

I know you're a product of Queens. Tell me about your parents and your childhood. What do your parents do? What was your childhood like?

Randy Bowens: Yes, I am a product of Queens, my hometown. My mother, who's no longer with us, she passed in 2019, she was a great person, a strong Black woman raising her children in a rough neighborhood in Queens. She held jobs as home health aide, she was also a cook, a very good one at that. She was the family cook. My brothers and I would have our friends come over Sundays. They would try to make sure they could stop by for Sunday dinners, and different celebrations that we had. It was always good company and good food, and my mother was always welcoming to anyone who wanted to come and hang out and just have a good time. Besides being a cook and home health aide, her most important job and role was raising my brothers and my sister, and just keeping an eye on us, and making sure that we were doing the right thing.

John Caher: How many siblings do you have?

Randy Bowens: I have a blended family. I have siblings on my mom's side, and also from my dad's, also stepsiblings as well. Altogether, I think there are seven of us.

My father had served the National Guard. He was also a paraprofessional, and also a robotics instructor.

John Caher: Really?

Randy Bowens: Yeah, he's retired now, but he even had his own business, a technical service business, at one point. He's a Jack of all trades kind of a guy.

John Caher: Your parents would have been born, I'm guessing, roughly 1950-ish? Right?

Randy Bowens: Right.

John Caher: So they were probably born before *Brown v. Board of Education*. They probably witnessed all kinds of things, endured all kinds of things. What did you learn from them about their past?

Randy Bowens: They wanted to educate us and prepare us for the world. I remember having conversations with them at a young age, and having questions. When I was younger, I always wondered what it would be like growing up during those times. I always wondered what kind of an impact it had on them, because even though we're not exactly where we need to be as far as the country and as the world, we've definitely made some progress.

John Caher: Who were your early role models?

Randy Bowens: My very first role model is my father. It's my dad. Like I said, he was Jack of all trades. To me, there was nothing he couldn't do, nothing he couldn't fix. Whenever things would go wrong, I'd go to him and he always had the answers. I remember being a young boy thinking, "Man, how could I ever grow up to be like that and know the things that he knows and be able to do the things that he does." I could never do that. He's a technician. It all seemed like it just came so easy to him.

John Caher: I'm sure it didn't.

Randy Bowens: Yeah. Yeah, but he was definitely one of my early role models. As a young Black boy, especially coming up out of Queens, it was also all the hometown heroes. There's a rapper, Nas, who came from my neighborhood, and most of us aspired and wanted to be like him. We wanted to rise to a certain level of success. We also had Ron Artest, the basketball player, that came from the neighborhood. He played in the NBA, won a championship with Kobe Bryant. Those were also early role models, wanting to be like them and just attain certain levels of success.

John Caher: Were there any experiences as a child that in reflection perhaps led you on this career path?

Randy Bowens: Growing up, and where I grew up is Queensbridge, there was a community center that I used to frequent. They had a lot of programs available for young folks, and things like career development and lifestyle coaching. I remember we had a men's group where we just sat and

discussed things. That community center helped me out a lot. It kind of pointed me in the right direction. It was so many other kids from the neighborhood, and they told us that statistically a lot of us weren't going to make it out.

John Caher: Wow.

Randy Bowens: You're looking around -- and we're all innocent children. We're just kids -- and we were told about the guys who were in jail: "You see the guys hanging out on the corner? A good number of *you* unfortunately will fall into that category. It's up to *you* if you're going to be part of that statistic or whether you're going to strive to do better."

John Caher: So you were told this was not inevitable, that your life was not predetermined, that there was an out, but you had to do your part. Is that correct?

Randy Bowens: Exactly. Exactly that. I remember that we looked around and we all felt the same way, "Oh no, it's not going to be any of us." And looking back now, I know that there are a good number of the guys I came up with who fell into that category. But I remember always wanting to get back and work with youth, and try to empower youth, and let them know that there are other options out there. There's more that can be done. You don't have to become a statistic.

John Caher: You mentioned working with youth. In what capacity have you done that?

Randy Bowens: I went back to the same neighborhood and participated in a few programs. But I haven't been able to do exactly what I wanted to do. When I started working at a bank, and it was through a program at the community center that I got into a training, which led me to an Israeli bank that I worked at for about six and a half years. My career path kind of just took me into getting a job. I remember working there and my boss at the time told me that he thought that I was great, that people liked me, and he wanted to do things for me, and wanted to see me go places. But he's like, "You got to do something for me. You got to get that piece of paper. You got to get a degree."

He convinced me to go to school at night, and I obtained my bachelor's in finance. I went to Baruch College. That was a struggle, working full-time and then going to school full-time. It was hard, but I got it done. That ate up so much of my time that it was hard to find time to do other things. I have cousins and nephews, and always worked with them and steering

them in a right direction, but as far as reaching out to those communities, that's what I'm looking to do. It's something I haven't been able to really do as of yet.

John Caher: So that's a goal.

Randy Bowens: Yes, it is.

John Caher: You also have children, I believe, right?

Randy Bowens: Yes. I have four children. I have two wonderful boys who I inherited from my wife, Scott and Daniel. Then I have my two little guys, little terrors that keep me on my toes. It's a full house. There's always something going on there.

John Caher: Sometimes I think children are God's way of getting you back for the trauma you brought on your own parents!

Randy Bowens: Listen, my mother, she was fortunate enough to meet both of my little guys, RJ and Carter. She saw them being disobedient and she would just laugh. My father also got a kick out of it. He would just laugh. I'm like, "What is so funny?" He's like, "Oh, because you're getting it back. This is just fun to watch."

John Caher: How did you go from wanting to work in the financial industry, including for an Israeli bank, to working for the Attorney for Children Office? That seems like not a natural progression.

Randy Bowens: Right. Right. When I got the job working for the Israeli bank, for me it was just about having a job, because when I finished high school I was kind of caught in this window where I wasn't doing anything. My mother told me straight up, "You are either going to go to college, go to school, or you're going to get a job. There's no way you're going to sit around here and do nothing." At the time, I didn't want to go to school, so that's how I pursued the job working at the bank.

For me, it was just a job. It was a way to put money in my pocket, the way I was able to move out and get my own apartment. It was good until about 2008 when the housing bubble hit and had a trickle-down effect on the financial industry. Things just weren't going great. I had been progressing in the bank, and it's like everything just came to a halt because people were being laid off and business was just not what it was.

I was looking into moving on and my coworker at the time, she's the one that told me about a position open in the courts. She said, "Oh, it's Attorneys for Children." When I heard "Children," immediately I was like, "All right, I got to look into that." I applied for it, got the job. Initially, what I thought is that I was going to be working directly with children, but I was actually supporting the attorneys who were representing children. It is important work. Working there I realized that our children, our most vulnerable, need that support and the attorneys who were representing them in family court matters and cases, ranging from abuse and neglect matters to custody proceedings and juvenile delinquency proceedings.

I was the liaison to the Attorneys for Children Advisory Committees. I reviewed the applications for attorneys looking to join the panel, assisted in creating training for those attorneys, and continually doing education programs. I also had to investigate complaints because sometimes there were issues that arose. There were some challenges, but it was a great experience for me. There's so much that I learned from the director, who was then Harriet Weinberger. She's a great person. She's a great leader, and I learned so much from her.

John Caher: How did that experience frame your views on children in the legal system? I'm sure it was very eye-opening in a lot of ways.

Randy Bowens: Yeah, it was. You always hear about things that are happening in the courts, but when you're reading these cases and seeing the details and it's over, and over, and over, you realize that there's so much happening, but particularly to children and communities of color when you look at the demographic. I just remember when the Raise the Age legislation came about, and just being happy and pleased because we should look at them as children, as what they are. And I'm glad the social science showed, "Listen, you can't treat these children like adults. You got to give them a chance." You really do.

John Caher: So how did you happen to join the Office for Justice Initiatives?

Randy Bowens: I remember when Secretary Jeh Johnson's report was released, the director of the program, then Harriet Weinberger, she shared it with the office and asked that we read it, said it was important. I remember reading it. Although I wasn't that surprised that there was so much racism in the courts, it was just alarming seeing it written down. That report, it was just eye-opening. I remember hearing about the challenges. I remember hearing that Judge Richardson-Mendelson was tapped to lead our court system in rooting out racism and bias in the courts. I

remember thinking then how much I would like to be a part of that. There was a career development workshop, I think, that the Tribune Society had put on. It was about advancing your career. It was a two-day program, I believe, and it was stacked. When I looked at those who were involved and the leadership positions within the courts, and seeing that they look like me, I remember thinking, "I got to strive to do better. I got to put myself in a better position." I kept my eye on job postings. When I saw the posting for the Statewide Equal Justice Coordinator, I jumped at it and applied.

John Caher: What does a Statewide Equal Justice Coordinator do?

Randy Bowens: There are a number of things that I do, but I think the most important is being a thread throughout the state. Judge Richardson-Mendelson, when she started this work, she had created local equal justice committees all throughout the state. My position was to somehow connect everyone. There's so much important work happening all across the state.

What I do is I meet with a lot of the local equal justice committees. I meet with the district leaders that participate in the program, and assist the development of programming and establishment of new local equal justice committees.

I've also been receiving funding requests for those equal justice endeavors and programs, events, special projects, anything involving equal justice. We have to budget for it because these things come with a cost. So, it has to be financially supported as well. That's another thing I'm doing, is fielding those requests.

John Caher: It sounds like the equal justice committees, and I think there are probably a couple dozen of them, are on the ground local entities and you're kind of the umbrella that ties them all together. Is that an accurate-

Randy Bowens: Fair enough, I would say. I think that there's going to be more to this position the longer that I'm in it. I'm hoping that the position grows. I think in the long-term I would hope that everyone pretty much knows who I am, not because I want any type fame, but because that's what the judge had in mind when she created this position. I want to have my reach all across the state. We're leading by example.

John Caher: How so?

Randy Bowens: We have other states that are adopting the work that we do here. We're learning what other states are doing. For instance, with our juror bias

video, other states that saw it and was, "Wow!" They wanted to adopt our program and carry out the same thing in their states. I also recently learned that other states are looking to have independent reviews conducted on their court systems, just as we had Secretary Jeh Johnson take a deep dive in ours.

John Caher: You mentioned the jury bias video, and I think that was a short program designed to inform, educate and warn prospective jurors about implicit bias. Is that right?

Randy Bowens: Yes. Yes, and it's because there's implicit bias and there's explicit bias. When it comes to implicit bias, there are things that we're not aware of. And the science has been done on this, it's the way our brains work and the way it automatically fills in information for us. I think it's important that we all find out that we have implicit biases. No one, I don't think there's one person who could say that they don't. The reason that anyone would say that they don't have any type of bias is because they haven't taken a hard enough look at themselves.

The important thing is to identify it, realize that you do. That's the way you can train your brain to take a step back. Instead of just filling in these gaps because of your experiences, you got to really look at things on a case-by-case basis. You can't just have a broad review of the world or of people, a certain type of people.

John Caher: With the jury system, that seems to require a balance because we want a diverse jury pool, people who would bring their experiences to the jury room while leaving their biases behind. You may have people who, because of their experiences, are very, very inclined to believe law enforcement officers. And you may have people who because of their experiences are totally disinclined to believe law enforcement officers. And somehow, you have to marry those experiences with the facts in the case.

Randy Bowens: Right. Right. Absolutely. When folks come in, prospective jurors, they come in and if they're not made aware that these things exist, that implicit bias exists, then how do they get around it? The key is just to educate, put the information out there.

John Caher: What are your short and long-term goals, or what are Judge Richardson-Mendelson's short and long-term goals, because those are your goals?

Randy Bowens: What she really wants is for everyone to get involved because we should all be doing our part and trying to eliminate bias and racism from the

courts. The key is also education. You look just around the state, cultural awareness, you look at the months. We have so much that we celebrate. You make folks aware of other people's thoughts and perceptions, and experiences. Because the more you know about a particular group of people, I think it will help you have a better outlook.

So, it's just keeping up with the programming, doing more programming. Community outreach is definitely important. And, getting everyone to learn their local history, because there's so much good and bad, but you never learn it. You got to know where we've been to know where we're going, right? So just keeping up with a lot of the programming. From year-to-year we'll keep releasing our Equal Justice Year in Review reports and try to highlight everything that's going on around the state. Hopefully, that motivates folks so they could see that these things are going on and make them want to be involved.

We want folks to have these difficult conversations in talking about race and bias and increasing our diversity in the workforce. Diversity is *more*. It's *more* culture. It's *more* perceptions. It's *more* experience. It's *more* ideas. I think the more that you have, the better you could do. Say you're developing some new program or initiative. There may be someone who's a member of that community where English is not their first language, and they may be the person to say, "Hey, let's not forget about non-English speaking folks," to make sure that we're making this accessible for everyone.

John Caher: At the end of the day, it's really an access to justice issue, isn't it?

Randy Bowens: Absolutely. Absolutely. What we've learned is that equal justice and access to justice are just really intertwined.

John Caher: It seems so obvious. Now, none of this happens, none of this is possible without total buy-in from the administration, the people who are above you. Are you getting the support you need?

Randy Bowens: Absolutely. Absolutely. Just with the Office for Justice Initiatives, we have a wonderful team here.

John Caher: Yes, you do.

Randy Bowens: John, you know, you've worked with us, so you see how everyone pitches in and they do their part. We all have the same goals in line. In pursuit of equal justice, it just can't be somebody who says, "I'm here to just do the job." If you don't really feel it, if you don't really want it, then you're not

going to give the real effort. You're not going to put in a real effort that it's going to take to achieve equal justice for everyone, for court employees, for court users. You got to have it in your heart. That's a passion for me.

John Caher: Passion. It sounds like that is so crucial and I don't know if I've ever seen anyone with more passion than Judge Richardson-Mendelson!

Randy Bowens: Oh listen, she *radiates*, man. Her energy is unmatched. Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Norman St. George gave her the title "Titan of Justice," and rightfully so because it's what she is. Working with her, you can't help but receive and take in some of that energy.

John Caher: Let's turn the focus back to you. You told me about your children. Where do you live?

Randy Bowens: I'm a product of Queens, and I am still here. Still in Queens. I'm a Queens boy through and through. We live out in South Richmond Hill.

John Caher: What do you do in your free time?

Randy Bowens: I got to say, there is not a lot of free time in dealing with the little guys! Man, they really do keep us busy. I would say that I get a lot of joy out of just being with my family. Like I said, they keep me on my toes. There's always something to do. They fill me with laughter and joy, even though they're also the number one contributor to all of the gray hairs you see growing out over here. Other than spending time with them, I'm a movie head. I love watching movies and TV shows. I think a lot of the free time that I have is probably going to be spent in community dealings, because that's really what I want to do. I got to get back to the basics and do more.

John Caher: Hopefully as time goes on, you'll be able to fulfill your goal of working directly with kids in some sort of a volunteer capacity.

Randy Bowens: Absolutely.

John Caher: Randy, thank you so much for your time. More importantly, thank you for the work that you're doing in the cause of justice. We all appreciate it.

Randy Bowens: Thank you, John. Anyone who does listen, if they want to know how they can contribute, I would just say get in contact with your local equal justice committees. Know who they are. Seek them out. They want to hear from you.

John Caher: What a wonderful way to end. Thank you again, Randy.