

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Christine Farrow

John Caher:

Welcome to Amici, news and insights from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

For today's Diversity Dialogue segment, we're honored to feature Dr. Christine Farrow, the first female and first African American ever to serve as Commissioner of Jurors in Erie County. Dr. Farrow, who has masters and doctorate degrees from the University at Buffalo, and a Diversity and Inclusion certificate from Cornell University, was appointed commissioner in 2021.

We'll be chatting with her today about how a child from the projects on the East Side of Buffalo grows up to earn a PhD and hold a high government position, the challenges she and other jury commissioners face in attempting to diversify the jury pool and the way she both pays it back and plays it forward as the first ever African American President of the Board of Directors of Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Erie, Niagara, and the Southern Tier.

Dr. Farrow, thank you for coming on the program. I alluded to your roots in the projects. Tell me if you would, about your childhood, your early family life.

Christine Farrow:

Thank you so much, John, for having me. I was born in Buffalo, grew up in housing projects on the East Side, raised by a single mother. I have three siblings, two older brothers, and a younger sister. I just like to keep things real, so I'll do so in this situation.

Generally, there is a negative association when it comes to where folks were born or where they grew up, so we didn't have many resources and our access to positive role models were basically non-existent. But I'm so grateful for my mother. She did everything that she could to make sure my siblings and I wouldn't become a product of our environment. She literally would say that to us probably a hundred times a day. If there was any type of afterschool program, we were there. Any type of program that she knew about in the summer, we were there.

I am a proud graduate of Buffalo Public Schools and I give a lot of credit for my upbringing to Buffalo Public Schools. I give them a lot of credit, I should say, regarding where I am today. I think going to public schools helped build my character, taught me a lot about adversity and diversity, and it helped me a great deal in navigating challenging situations. So that's my early life and my childhood in a nutshell.

John Caher: It sounds like your hero and role model was your mother?

Christine Farrow: Yes. She taught me so much. Of the many things she taught me, one that always remains with me is how important it is to be resourceful, how to research things, always ask questions, and the importance of sharing what you have with others. As I mentioned, we didn't have a lot, so I'm not talking about sharing material things, but sharing things in terms of information and the knowledge that you have in the hopes that it's going to help someone in a similar situation.

John Caher: Where did she learn those lessons that she taught you?

Christine Farrow: Her own upbringing. They were things that she learned in her upbringing in terms of what not to do and what to do.

John Caher: What were your most formative experiences as a child?

Christine Farrow: As I mentioned, if there was a program my mother felt we would benefit from, we were there. So at the age of seven, I was linked with Big Brothers Big Sister. And, John, I will tell you that having a Big Sister or a mentor was life changing. My Big Sister would take me to her college dorm and we would hang out in her dorm, and I was just in awe to see people that looked like me on this college campus. So that experience at the age of seven basically planted the seed. I knew that someday, "I'm going to college and I'm going to be just like these ladies that I see." So that was probably one of the most formative experiences from my childhood.

John Caher: Is that what made the difference in your life than maybe other people in your neighborhood?

Christine Farrow: Definitely. Exposure and having a positive role model, being taken out of my environment knowing that there's an entire world outside of these housing projects.

John Caher: Was it that exposure to college by your mentor, your Big Sister, that planted the seed for you, that you wanted to go to college someday?

Christine Farrow: Absolutely. It was literally that one experience because my mother, she didn't have a high school diploma. She didn't get her GED until my siblings and I were older. And it's not like anyone in my immediate family or any parents of my friends, it's not like they went to college or ever talked about that. So it was definitely that one experience that planted

that seed for me to know that somewhere down the line, this is where I'm going to be.

John Caher: And as I said in the introduction, you're both paying it back and playing it forward with your own involvement with Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Christine Farrow: Yes, the program has been a part of my life, nearly 40 years. I'm 47, and I entered the program at the age of seven. So I was a Big Sister, twice providing two little girls with the same experience that I had. And I served on the board in a number of roles, and it's literally full circle because I served as the board president for the exact same agency that gave me such a life changing experience. So when I tell people about it and when I talk about it, it kind of gives me chills, and at times I get emotional because that's just how impactful that program was to me.

John Caher: In this region, I'm in the Albany area, I know there are many more youth in need of a Big Brother or Big Sister than there are Big Brothers or Big Sisters. Is that the situation in Buffalo as well?

Christine Farrow: Yes. And I would say being a youth is probably more challenging now than ever, probably much more challenging than it was 40 years ago. There's so many children that are facing adversity. The late CEO used to always call the kids in his program, "children on the brink of success." He didn't like to say "facing adversity." He would say "children on the brink of success," and those children, if they're exposed to a mentor, can be so impactful. And again, I'm a beneficiary of that.

It's so true that every child has such potential and it only takes that relationship with a mentor, a positive role model, to ignite that potential. I think it's so important because there's so many statistics that show the kids that have a mentor, they have increased self-esteem, they have improved relationships with their peers as well as adults, they have less involvement in the criminal justice system, and they do better academically than folks without a mentor.

John Caher: I'm not at all surprised, and I love that phrase, "brink of success." And I'm going to steal it from you!

Christine Farrow: Well, we have to give credit to Bob Moss because that was the founder of the affiliate here in this area, and he always looked at everything in a positive way. So I stole it from him, but you can steal it from him as well. [Robert F. Moss was the founder and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Erie County.]

John Caher: I'll just borrow it. Now, as a teenager, I mean, *you* were on the brink of success, right?

Christine Farrow: If I go back to the neighborhood that we were raised in, not a lot of positivity going on there. So my mother literally did everything that she could for us to be successful and get to where we needed to be, so that we could know that life does exist outside of this neighborhood.

John Caher: Now, she didn't have a much education?

Christine Farrow: No, she dropped out of high school and she didn't finish because she had my siblings and I. But she did go back to get her GED later on. And let me tell you, she's probably one of the most intelligent humans that I know. We always call each other and bounce ideas off of each other. And I'm like, "How does this sound?" "What about this?" "And what about that?" She's generally my sounding board and my go-to.

John Caher: Well, she's obviously not only intelligent, she seems to also have a tremendous amount of wisdom.

Christine Farrow: Definitely.

John Caher: Now you have degrees in education and counseling. How in the world with those degrees did you end up in the New York State Unified Court System?

Christine Farrow: Let's see if I can condense this story.

Prior to working for the court system, I worked in public transportation for about 11 ½ years in a variety of roles. I was overseeing the specialized transportation for folks with disabilities. In some regions, it's called peer transit. I managed the employee assistance program and the corporate wellness program, and I was also responsible for equal employment and developing diversity initiatives for public transportation. And I thoroughly enjoyed what I did.

But in 2018, I think it was, I was reading the *Buffalo News*, which is our local paper here. I'm a faithful reader, got that from my mother as well. We read everything. I came across an article and a New York State Supreme Court judge [Richard C. Klock], he was quoted in there saying that the fact that there were so many few Black jurors with his recent jury trial was troubling. I found that intriguing, and I'm inquisitive by nature.

So I began to look more into this area, and I discovered that jury diversity is an issue, but it wasn't isolated just to the Western New York area, but it was a nationwide problem. One of the reasons behind this issue stems from a lack of information, a lack of education about the process.

I often have these long conversations with myself, because I need an expert opinion at times, and I said to myself, "If an opportunity ever presented itself where I could lend my expertise as an educator, and I also do research, I would love to work on such an important issue. I would definitely be up for the challenge." And John, let's say I need to be careful about what I speak into existence, because shortly after that a position came available, and in 2019 I started as the Deputy Commissioner, and then three months into my position, the commissioner decided that he wanted to retire. So here I am. I served in the acting role for about two years, and then in 2021, I was appointed by the jury board to the role of commissioner.

John Caher: It sounds like it was just meant to be your destiny.

Christine Farrow: Again, I need to be careful about what I speak into existence, but in this case, it was a good thing. I thoroughly enjoy what I do every single day, I am so honored that I get to work with some of the best and brightest legal minds in the entire community.

John Caher: Now, I know you have a daunting challenge, and it's a challenge shared probably by 62 jury commissioners across the state. I've heard the other commissioners speak with frustration and what they see, and what they often see is that people from certain communities don't want to serve on a jury because they don't trust the system, because when they do go to court, they don't see anyone who looks like them. And it becomes a self-perpetuating issue. How do you break through that?

Christine Farrow: So for me, it's tackling the, I would say, generational level of misinformation and rumors about jury process and the court system as a whole. And I find that this is so entrenched, especially in communities of color.

For example, when I do go out into the community and I explain the process to folks, I typically get the response, "Oh, I didn't know that actually happens like that." And one thing that I'm spearheading here in Erie County, along with my friends from federal court, the Western District as well as the US Attorney and the local District Attorney, is a jury diversification initiative. And I want to say almost with certainty that this is the first time ever that the three, I'll say layers, have ever come

together — federal, state, and local— to tackle such a major, major issue. And a major part of this initiative is community outreach.

John, we've done so much outreach that it's amazing, and we literally go out into the community and meet people where they are. The judges come along, the law clerks come along, the district attorney comes along and they explain things to folks, plain English, dispel any myths, any rumors that they may have heard about the court system. We host a lot of community groups. We host a lot of school groups to let them know, "Look, here's a behind-the-scenes look at how the system actually works." And I can tell you that the feedback and the reactions are always so positive, and it's because the information that they're getting is from *people that look like them*. And not only do the people look like them, they actually work in the system every single day. So the feedback and the results are very, very positive.

John Caher: Now, why is it important to have a diverse jury pool?

Christine Farrow: There are countless reasons. I always preach to folks that jury diversity matters because basically the jury is the voice of the community. And when it comes to having diverse folks on a jury, it prevents "group think." And if we don't know what group think is, basically it causes people to ignore important information, and it ultimately leads to poor decision making. And another reason it's is we tend to interpret things based on, let's say, our upbringing, our own experiences or lack of experiences. If everyone on the jury pool were all raised up in a similar situation, similar upbringing, similar backgrounds, there probably won't be anyone during the deliberation process who will raise their hand and say, "Wait a minute, we need to look at this another way." And the jury, again, they serve as the finders of the facts.

And I tell people all the time, it's you, the jury, that determines everything. Yes, the judge is important, everyone else in the courtroom is important, but when it comes to finding the facts, it's up to the jury. So again, it's up to them to evaluate everything carefully. And at times, you do need someone from a different background, different upbringing, different experience to say, "Hey, let's look at that a little different." And another thing I always tell folks, yes, jury diversity matters, and race and ethnicity is important, but we also need to make certain that we have diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, education, as well as gender. So in a nutshell, I would just say having a wide range of human experiences on a jury is simply invaluable.

John Caher: In my experience, when people serve on a jury, they become our greatest ambassadors for the court system.

Christine Farrow: Listen, here in Erie our grand jurors serve for six weeks at a time. And during COVID, we had one of our grand juries serving for, I want to say it was nine or 10 weeks. And they stop up to our office and they get their proof of service. And well over half would say, "I really didn't know all that goes on. How can I do that again? Can I do it sooner?"

And a lesser-known fact is that you can actually volunteer, you can reduce your period of ineligibility is what we call it. You wait a certain period of time and you go onto our website and you're basically just volunteering to put your name back into our random pool sooner than we would call you.

John Caher: I don't know if there is a more direct or more empowering way to participate in democracy. I mean, even more so than voting. In voting, you're one of many thousands, millions. A jury, you're one of 12.

Christine Farrow: And John, this is something that we're only asking you to do once every eight years. Voting is extremely important. And I don't diminish that in any way.

John Caher: Neither do I.

Christine Farrow: No, I tell people that all the time because there's always a big push when it comes to voting. There's tons of campaigns, tons of ads around the importance of voting, and it's extremely important. But when it comes to jury service in Erie, this is something that we're only asking you to do once every eight years. Once every eight years. And again, people need to fully understand the process. And I would bet anyone, once you go through the process, you'll say, "Wow, it's not as bad as X said it would be." It's truly, truly a rewarding and an educational experience. And what I get is that, "Oh, it's not like what I saw on TV."

John Caher: Now I'm going to switch gears a little bit. So what do you like to do in your free time? Or is the question, what would you do in your free time if you had free time?

Christine Farrow: I'm also an adjunct professor for the University at Buffalo. I teach a variety of graduate level counseling courses. So that's what I generally do outside of work, in addition to volunteering with Big Brothers Big Sisters. But in my free time, I enjoy traveling, and I recently picked up a love for

cruising. But my latest addiction, and John, please tell me that this is a judgment free zone.

John Caher: It is.

Christine Farrow: I've become addicted to, it's a show on the History Channel called "The Food That Built America," and they basically trace the origin of some of America's most iconic food brands. I'm literally fascinated by this, how TV dinners came about, the rivals between Pepsi and Coca-Cola, Oscar Meyer and brands like that. But I can literally watch that all day.

John Caher: As I think you said earlier, you are naturally curious, right?

Christine Farrow: Yes, I am. Literally, it'll come on and I'm locked in front of the TV all day on a Sunday.

John Caher: Now, you told me offline that your single most important piece of advice to young people is never let anyone outwork you. What do you mean by that?

Christine Farrow: Well, I live by some type of analogy, and it's something that I also tell myself. So when I say that, I mean you need to put in the work, whatever your goal may be. You have to make sure you work harder than anyone on your team, anyone in your class, anyone that you may be in competition with. Success starts and it ends with hard work.

And John, we all have the same 24 hours in a day. So ask yourself, how are you spending those hours? Are you doing the work when you don't want to do the work? Are you doing the work that nobody wants to do? I'm not much of a sports fan, but I tend to follow some of the greatest athletes. I look at, what is their work ethic? And as I look at their work ethic, it's like, wow, what they do off the court in terms of preparing is far more impressive than what they do on the court or on the field. If you want to be the best, you have to work harder than anyone else.

I have a sign in my office that reads, "There's no such thing as luck." Do the work, put in the hours, and you get the reward. So that's what I mean by never let anyone outwork you. I applied that to myself going through graduate school. Anything that was math related or statistics related, my mind just didn't work like that. I just didn't get it. But no one would ever have known that because I woke up at 3:30 in the morning to work on my stats. I stayed after my classes to go to tutoring for stats.

So no one would ever know that because I put in the work. I know that in graduate school, there's a certain level that you have to achieve. And I knew that. "Christine, if you want to achieve this level, you got to put in the work. You got to sacrifice. What are you doing with your 24 hours? Are you hanging out or are you working on the lesson that you're struggling with?" So basically, just put in the work.

John Caher: What tremendous advice. In closing, what is the single most important thing that people should know about Christine Farrow?

Christine Farrow: I would say that what you see is what you get. Regardless of whatever setting I'm in, regardless of the situation, I'm always, always the same person. You will always see me with a smile on my face, regardless of where I am or what's going on with me or within the world. You'll always see me with a smile. So what you see is what you get.

John Caher: What a wonderful way to end. Thank you so much for your time, and thank you so much for your service.

Christine Farrow: Thanks, John. Have a good one.

John Caher: You too.