

Making a Difference

Based on an interview of Judge Janice Wellington by Alissa N. Hudson in October 2015

Janice Wellington grew up in New York City in the 60's in a tight knit extended family. Her parents, grandparents and aunts cared for, nurtured and kept a watchful eye on her and her sister as they were growing up in the midst of great social unrest.

When asked if law was her first career choice, Wellington recalled that while in high school, she loved watching Perry Mason win all his cases on TV. He used the law to help people and made a difference. She wanted to do the same. She attended Lehman College, graduating with degrees in history and education, and attended George Washington University School of Law on a scholarship, graduating in 1978. She recalls that she was one of very few minority students at the time.

Her first job after law school was working for the Department of Transportation as general counsel. And then a series of events occurred in rapid fire succession that brought her to Manassas. It began with a "neighbor [who] had a son who got into trouble" and he asked if she would "go to court with him in juvenile court." She tried to explain that she was a government lawyer, not a litigator, but he persisted. On the morning when the youth was scheduled to appear in court, Janice Wellington thought, "if I go left, it's going to DC, if I go right I would be going to Manassas. I went right and had no clue" what I was going to do when I got there. Ultimately, she spoke to the prosecutor, Jim Robeson, and tried the case before Judge Whisenant who commented that she'd done a fine job and released the client back to his parents.

As she was talking with Robeson, she mentioned that she was "contemplating opening a private practice." Well, there happened to be a PWC Bar Luncheon that day, so Jim invited Janice to attend. She was introduced to a number of attorneys and found everyone very welcoming. Two weeks later, she received a phone call from an attorney named Jim Turner who had a practice in Dumfries. Word had traveled to him about her interest in private practice, and he was heading into retirement and looking for an associate to help him wind things down. They met, and he hired her on the spot and became a wonderful mentor to her. He was a "great teacher" and a "real stickler" for details, something Wellington attributes to his military background. He took her "under his wing" and taught her everything about the "ins and outs of practice." They eventually became partners, practicing "together for a number of years." Their practice included domestic, juvenile, personal injury, local counsel and local government work. After Turner's retirement, Wellington joined law school classmate Sally Merchak, both "of council" with the law firm of Peterson and Pesner, and they eventually went out on their own.

Wellington joined Merchak and the handful of other women attorneys in practice in the early 80s to help establish the Virginia Women Attorneys' Association. It was the VWAA that encouraged Wellington to run when a seat became open on the PWC JDR District Court Bench. She was appointed in 1990 to fill the seat vacated by Judge Kellam, and continues to serve to this day. She was the first women judge and the first African American judge to be appointed to the PWC Bench, and she recalls her investiture fondly, which was a triple. William Hamblen was being sworn in for PWC Circuit Court, LeRoy Millette for PWC GDC and Wellington for JDR. The courtroom was packed.

As Wellington reflects on her 25 years on the Bench, it is clear she is grateful for the "extraordinary opportunity" she has been given. She says "there's no two days that are alike" and she likes "to be a part of fixing things and helping folks get it right. That's a privilege, to be a part of the transformation that can occur in lives when they have some help. You're not always successful. But when [you] are, it's worth it."