

Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future

This series was inspired by Roger Williams University School of Law's annual *Women in Robes* event and was created in alliance with their exciting new project, *The First Women*, which recognizes and honors the first women of the Rhode Island Bar.



Hon. Melissa R. DuBose
RI District Court Associate Judge

Humble and genuine are the first words that come to mind in describing the impression Associate Judge Melissa DuBose leaves on those she meets. These qualities, along with her demonstrated hard work and passion, led her to become a great addition to the District Court.

One of Judge DuBose's first jobs was as a barista (before there was such a fancy name) at a café in Providence that served many high school students. She was always talkative and supportive of her student customers, which led her down a path to apply her caring attitude toward a teaching career. She started teaching part-time at School One while earning her education degree from Providence College. Then she transitioned to a full-time position teaching history and western civilization to high school students. She absolutely loved her students, growing strong bonds with them through empathy and caring about what happened to them beyond the school walls. It was not until a tragedy struck her group of students that she thought about law school.

While teaching at Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy Charter School, one of Judge DuBose's former students was arrested for murdering another student in gang-related violence. The arrestee was a smart and sweet student, and no one expected him to do something like that.

This horrible event struck Judge DuBose and her students to their core. Many students were asking what would happen in the juvenile court system, as a lot of distrust existed about that system. That is when she decided the best way she could give back to her community was by being a part of the solution from within the legal system.

Judge DuBose was one of the last groups of students in Roger Williams University School of Law's night-time law program, attending while simultaneously teaching at Central High School. She is grateful to her high school students who supported and cheered her on through law school. After receiving her law degree, Judge DuBose continued teaching until an opportunity arose to join the Office of the Rhode Island Attorney General as a prosecutor.

Reflecting on being a prosecutor, Judge DuBose was always mindful of the power of the position, determining whether or not to prosecute any given case. She made it her mission to make sure every case that came before her was appropriate for prosecution, supported by adequate evidence. She saw this as an opportunity to create justice. Reflecting back on her students, Judge DuBose shared that they felt a sense of betrayal when she took this new position prosecuting juveniles, individuals just like them. She was determined to persuade her former students that the justice system was not as terrifying and crooked as they believed, frequently inviting them to the Superior Court to watch the system operate firsthand. Those experiences she facilitated gave many students a better impression of the justice system, even motivating some of her former students to become lawyers in practice today.

After her service at the AG's Office, Judge DuBose's life then took a completely different turn when she became in-house corporate counsel at Schneider Electric. This was not something she ever planned, but felt it was worth the leap of faith. While it was a completely different culture from public service (where the profit margin was of course one of the most important focal points), she loved being part of the impact of the company, bringing energy to low-income areas and developing nations. Though noting that the work was more transactional than interpersonal, she



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succeeded very well in that position, becoming an expert on compliance with the regulations that the business was subject to.

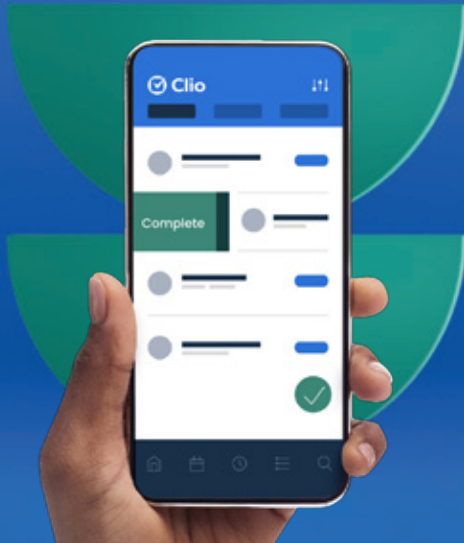
When a judgeship opened in District Court, many of Judge DuBose's supportive friends and neighbors encouraged her to apply. Her approach to the application process was to be her genuine self, an approach that kept stress at bay. Governor Raimondo saw her talent as a great asset to the bench and she was sworn in in 2019. Many of her students were at her swearing-in because of the continuing strong relationship she has with them. Since then, she has been a great contribution to the District Court for lawyers and all individuals that appear in front of her.

After the tragic police killings of black individuals in the summer of 2020 (including George Floyd), Judge DuBose began to think more and more about the judiciary's role in the fight against racial injustice. She started having conversations with Justice Long, Judge Smith, and (Ret.) Judge Clifton about what the Rhode Island Courts should be doing. Chief Justice Suttell joined in the conversation, and this ultimately led to the creation of the Court's Committee on Racial and Ethnic Fairness (CREF). Judge DuBose was involved in drafting the 'This We Believe' public statement by the Committee in response to the tragedies of 2020. She felt it was important that the judiciary take steps to combat racial injustice as it is part of their oath to "build public faith and confidence in the courts," which is currently very low throughout the country.

Judge DuBose discussed CREF's first big project, the removal of legacy fees and costs. After hearing from defendants caught in the never-ending cycle of court fee debt and the mental health impact of knowing they will never be able to pay off this debt that prevented them from living their lives, Judge DuBose pushed for a program to eliminate that debt. She was surprised by hearing about how much trauma these debts caused, and some people had contemplated suicide. The program ultimately eliminated approximately 2 million dollars in court costs and fees. Judge DuBose is still an active member of CREF, listening to marginalized communities about how the judiciary can become fairer and



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more representative of the communities it serves.

Judge DuBose's advice to other lawyers is that it is okay to pivot. She never thought her life would take the many different turns it did, but it brought her to where she is today, and she values all those life experiences. She emphasizes allowing yourself to change and having the courage to be your authentic self. When you do what you believe, it makes all the difference. Judge DuBose encourages us to own our voice and own our space. Being different in an environment that you're not used to can be intimidating, but finding your own voice and space in that environment gives you the courage to push through.

Judge DuBose still lives in the same area of Providence she grew up in, where she continually learns from her surrounding neighbors who have become her closest friends. When she is not on the bench, you will find her hosting parties with friends because she loves getting to know people through great conversation. She also enjoys gardening and is a strong competitor when playing video games with her sons.

Judge DuBose is a great asset to the Rhode Island Courts and will continue to be a valuable role model for many years to come. Rhode Island is very lucky to have an amazing individual committed to making a difference through our state justice system. ◇

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