

SECOND JUDICIAL DISTRICT EQUAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE RECOGNIZES 'CELEBRATE DIVERSITY MONTH'



Chief Clerk for Civil Matters **Charles Small**; Senior Court Reporter **Nadonna Ferguson**; Assistant Court Analyst **Lissette Morales**; Hon. **Joanne D. Quinones**; Court Attorneys **Natoya L. McGhie, Esq.** and **Ronald Cosme Jr., Esq.**; and Court Officer **Joshua Crosby**. Photos courtesy of Natoya L. McGhie

By Natoya L. McGhie, Esq.

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April is “Celebrate Diversity Month!” In recognition of this annual celebration of diversity, the Equal Justice Committee for the Second Judicial District (2nd JD EJC) hosted two back-to-back events: a visit to Brooklyn High School for Leadership and Community Service, and the committee’s inaugural session of “C3: Courts and Communities in Conversation.”

The 2nd JD EJC is chaired by Acting Supreme Court Justice, Hon. Joanne D. Quiñones, and consists of judicial and nonjudicial court staff including Daniel Alessandrino, chief clerk for Criminal Matters; Ronald Cosme Jr., Esq., associate court attorney to AJSC Hon. Joanne D. Quiñones; Hon. Odessa Kennedy, acting justice of the Supreme Court; Natoya L. McGhie, Esq., principal court attorney to AJSC Hon. Jane Tully; Lissette Morales, assistant court analyst; Kiyoko Panzella, senior court reporter; Leah Richardson, network/systems engineer I; Captain David Salazar, Court Operations; Charles Small, Esq., chief clerk for Civil Matters; Nicole Smith, case management coordinator; and Hon. Nancy Sunshine, county clerk and commissioner of jurors.

On April 12, 2022, committee members were invited to speak with high school students at Brooklyn High School for Leadership and Community Service in Clinton Hill. The speakers included: Acting Justice of the Supreme Court Hon. Joanne D. Quiñones; Chief Clerk for Civil Matters Charles Small, Esq.; Court Attorneys Natoya L. McGhie, Esq. and Ronald Cosme Jr., Esq.; Senior Court Reporter Nadonna Ferguson; Assistant Court Analyst Lissette Morales; and Court Officer Joshua Crosby.



Court personnel and others who took part in the visit of the Equal Justice Committee for the Second Judicial District’s recent visit to the Brooklyn High School for Leadership and Community Service.



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Photo courtesy of Natoya L. McGhie

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In a matter of minutes, the grumblings of students balking at having to spend their lunch period listening to "these people in suits" quieted as each speaker discussed their unique career path in the courts and shared personal stories of triumphing over adversity. The speakers were real, raw and vulnerable.

They spoke candidly about their hardships, from overcoming a speech impediment and struggling as a teenage mom to living through gun violence and experiencing homelessness, some revealing truths they had never previously spoken out loud. The speakers stressed the importance of believing in oneself and not giving up.

The program concluded with the speakers highlighting the need for a diverse court system and encouraging the students to pursue careers in the courts. At the end of the visit, each student received a backpack with Office of Court Administration materials including a Careers in the Courts booklet, courtesy of the Office of Justice Initiatives under the leadership of Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives and Hon. Edwina Richardson Mendelson.

The next day, on April 13, 2022, the 2nd JD EJC met with members of the Iranian and Muslim Bar Associations to kick-off the committee's "C3: Courts and Communities in Conversation" initiative. Created by Committee Chair Justice Quinones, the purpose of the initiative is to open up lines of communication between

the court and community organizations by providing a forum where community members can discuss their perception of our courts and offer ways to improve the court's relationship with the community.

The inaugural C3 session was organized by Committee Member Justice Odessa Kennedy. Among the attendees were Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives Hon. Edwina Mendelson; Administrative Judge for Criminal Matters Hon. Matthew D'Emic; Administrative Judge for Civil Matters Hon. Lawrence Knipel; and bar leaders Fara Tabatabai, president of the Iranian American Bar Association's New York Chapter; Ally Hack, founder of the Association of Muslim American Lawyers; and Maryam Jazini-Dorcheh, a director with the Muslim Bar Association of New York.

DCAJ Mendelson fielded questions and addressed concerns voiced by the bar leaders. The meeting ended with a commitment from all in attendance to continue the conversation and "to put pen to paper" for future programs and recommendations, including a jointly sponsored continuing legal education (CLE) program.

The 2nd JD EJC will continue to educate the court family as well as the communities it represents on the benefits of a diverse and inclusive organization and looks forward to meeting with other community groups.

The committee will also be hosting programs and opportunities geared toward non-judicial staff. The first of these em-

ployee support programs is a mental health and wellness program scheduled for May 12, 2022, during the lunch hour. Daniel T. Lukasik, Esq., the judicial wellness coordinator for the NYS Office of Court Administration, will provide non-judicial staff with tips on managing your mental health and well-being.

By way of background, in June 2020, Chief Judge Janet DiFiore commissioned Former Director of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson to conduct an independent "Equal Justice Review" of the New York State court system's policies and practices as they relate to issues of racial bias and fairness.

The Report from the Special Advisor on Equal Justice in the New York State Courts, published in October 2020, set forth 13 recommendations. Following the report, the Hon. Edwina Mendelson, Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives, was appointed to lead the Equal Justice in Courts Initiative and to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Formed in November 2021, the 2nd JD EJC's mission is to ensure the fair and equitable treatment of all court users, including litigants, court staff and the general public. Its purposes include: to support and encourage a bias-free environment that reflects, recognizes and respects the rich diversity of our judicial district; to im-

prove existing court services to meet the needs of the communities we serve; to foster partnerships and create opportunities for dialogue between community organizations and our courts to increase the public's trust and confidence; to provide employees and community members with a meaningful opportunity to be heard and implement procedures that support fair and unbiased outcomes; to increase opportunities and services for nonjudicial employees; to promote diverse hiring practices and opportunities for advancement across all titles in the court system; and to raise awareness and educate the court and the public on the significance of a diverse and inclusive environment.

Natoya McGhie is the immediate past president of the Brooklyn Women's Bar Association and a court attorney at Kings Supreme in Brooklyn. She is also a member of the Equal Justice Committee for the Second Judicial District, which was created as part of the Equal Justice in Courts Initiative.

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