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PROFILES

LINDA TAYLOR FERGUSON



Traditionally, a significant percentage of black attorneys have pursued their profession in the role of community lawyers. These are attorneys who practice in minority communities and utilize their legal skills to educate and defend the legal rights of poor and minority communities. Today, considering the seemingly monumental tasks confronting community lawyers, it is understandable that many black attorneys are hesitant to undertake this particular type of practice. Despite the inherent hardships in this role, Linda Taylor Ferguson chose this very difficult legal career. Ms. Ferguson's career choice and her involvement with numerous political groups demonstrate her enduring belief and commitment to using her legal expertise in a practical way to improve the black community in a legal system where the scales of justice are often greatly skewed against their interests.

Ms. Ferguson was born in Columbus, Georgia and at age 10 she moved with her parents, four brothers, and four sisters to Compton, California. She completed grade school, junior high and high school in the Compton public school system. Upon graduation from high school, she went to UCLA on a scholarship and later on a Educational Opportunity grant. In 1969, she graduated with a degree in sociology and went to UCLA Law School under the Legal Educational Opportunity Program. After graduation from law school, Ms. Ferguson spent several months at NBC television working on a Black History documentary entitled "What It Is" that aired in the fall of 1973.

She began her legal career at the Greater Watts Justice Center (Justice Center), a project of the Los Angeles Legal Aid Foundation (LAFLA), which specialized in criminal trial representation. Ms. Ferguson's particular areas of practice included representing women charged with welfare fraud and defending people charged with police assault. Five other women attorneys were hired at the same time as Ms. Ferguson. This was a first for the Justice Center, as well as for the women attorneys. Ms. Ferguson stated that they were "thrown into the mouth of the lion" because they were immediately given trial case loads without having any experience in trying cases. This problem was compounded by the fact that young black women attorneys were a new phenomena to the Los Angeles court system and "shook up the old boy network." Ms. Ferguson felt that they were greeted with a lot of hostility and much of her time was spent combating challenges to her educational background, her credentials to practice law, her qualifications, and her right to be in court. The fact that there were other black women confronting the same type of harassment problems, who could understand her frustration, was instrumental in coping with the problems she encountered.

The most important thing Ms. Ferguson received, and that she now misses the most as a private practitioner, is the moral and psychological support system which was created as a result of the similarity in experiences with the women working with her at this time.

After about four and a half years at the Justice Center, Ms. Ferguson went to the Hill Street branch of LAFLA to gain some experience in civil litigation. This move was made so that she could broaden her base of experience. After one year, in 1978 she transferred to the Watts Legal Aid Office as the Directing Attorney. The Tenant Defense Center, a project developed as a mechanism for processing tenant responses to eviction, was created while she was the Directing Attorney. She handled social security, welfare, home foreclosure and landlord/tenant representation while working at the Watts office.

In May 1981, Ms. Ferguson left the Watts office to go into private practice. Although she had been planning to enter private practice for some time, the major impetus for her decision at this time was Ronald Reagan's attempt to destroy the legal service corporation. In response to this attack, the Legal Services Corporation had to use a lot of resources to protect its right to exist. As Directing Attorney, Ms. Ferguson would have had to spend most of her time lobbying to maintain the legal services program rather than practicing her profession. At the time, she preferred to "just practice law." In addition, she had been moving in the direction of private practice for some time.

Ms. Ferguson has been instrumental in forming several organizations. In 1973, she along with some other recent Black law graduates organized the Los Angeles chapter of the National Conference of Black Lawyers (NCBL). This legal association was created to address needs which were not being met by the regular bar association such as "providing basic education to the unemployed and underemployed about their basic legal rights, to provide representation in unpopular political cases, to develop a support network of lawyers who recognize political issues and to be spokespersons in those areas." Ms. Ferguson believes that lawyers are responsible for articulating some of the issues confronting the community. Based on her efforts in affecting change, she was named Lawyer of the Year by the national NCBL in 1979.

Ms. Ferguson has also worked as a member of the National Lawyer's Guild (NLG). While a member of NLG and NCBL she helped in forming the Police Practices Panel to address the developing issue of police abuse in the Los Angeles community. Also, working as a member of these two organizations along with La Raza Law Association and the Asian Law Collective, she helped found the People's College of Law in Los Angeles. She has been a staunch supporter of this institution because it is such a significant achievement for the organizations and persons involved since it was the first law school devoted to confronting the law in a political context.

Ms. Ferguson has served on the Board of Directors of Black Women Lawyers, John M. Langston Law Club, the UCLA Public Interest Law Foundation, and the Inner City Cultural Center. She has also been a member of the Coalition Against Police Abuse, the Southern Coalition for Battered Women, the Genosee Battered Womens' Shelter, and the Jamaa Drew

Drug Program. Ms. Ferguson has taught classes at UC Irvine, Cal State Long Beach, and People's College of Law. Currently she is most active in NCBL, but she is also available to these other organizations to give legal advice or to provide legal representation on specific legal cases and issues.

Questioned about how she finds the time for her solo practice, her husband, Dr. Lloyd Ferguson, her six year old twins, and her involvement in political groups, she replied, "I have a lot of motivation, but I'm running out of energy and I'm completely out of time." In the future, she wants to consolidate her practice with that of three or four attorneys who have the same type of focus and political viewpoints. Ms. Ferguson will no doubt handle her next challenge in the principled manner that she has exhibited throughout her legal career.

SANDRA K. MITCHELL