

President Judge Emphasizes Court Transparency

By Annie M. Kelley

WHEN PHILADELPHIA COURT OF COMMON Pleas Judge Sheila Woods-Skipper was unanimously elected president judge by her colleagues, it was clear that her leadership would have a positive effect on the Philadelphia Courts. During a recent address to the Women in the Profession Committee, she emphasized her devotion to building transparency and accountability within the courts.

Before Judge Woods-Skipper assumed her current role, she was the supervising judge of the Criminal Trial Division. As the only woman in administration on the criminal side, she focused on maintaining an open-door policy, and was always willing to lend a helping hand. Judge Woods-Skipper noted that there is a way to deliver a message in an un-demeaning manner, and to provide valuable lessons to be learned in the future. In particular, she explained that one does not always need to step on toes to convey a point.

Judge Woods-Skipper's role as president judge is slightly different now, but she continues to practice the same leadership skills. Inherently, her position allows her to highlight the ability to do good and make a difference. Specifically, she emphasized the need to improve the perception of the Philadelphia courts. There are so many positive things and programs that the court and the judges are involved in, but often only negative stories come out. Judge Woods-Skipper counters this trend by publishing on a



Photo by Meredith Avakian-Hardaway

President Judge Sheila Woods-Skipper (center) joins Women in the Profession Committee Co-Chairs Ourania Papademetriou (left) and Regina M. Foley at the committee's Jan. 28 program.

range of initiatives, including court-wide e-filing, converting forms in family and landlord-tenant court to six different languages, case reductions, decrease in time for trial in the civil division, and the judicial fellowship program.

The main goal is transparency through sharing what the court is doing, which necessarily includes its successes. In terms of areas for improvement, Judge Woods-Skipper noted they are always looking to upgrade technology concerns, juror issues and participation in trials, as well as general access to justice.

Judge Woods-Skipper is a lifelong Philadelphian and, therefore, has a very

strong investment in the community and what she, and the courts, can do for the community. Raised by a single parent in North Philadelphia, an obligation to give back was instilled in her at a young age. She explained that while one may not have much to give, we can always give time and a helping hand. Through high school, college, and law school, it became even more important to Judge Woods-Skipper to find mechanisms to make a difference, and she learned the "secret role" of what a leader does – one leads to make a difference, not to get recognition.

Judge Woods-Skipper shared an anecdote about paying it forward through

mentorship. She established a relationship with a young girl who attended the same church and needed someone to show her that she could do anything she put her mind to. Judge Woods-Skipper developed a deep, trusting relationship with the girl and watched her grow to a woman and a successful lawyer. By supporting and encouraging young women and men, she said we often don't know the impact we are having on others just by doing little things, but this is what leads to success in others and ourselves.

These same principles are applicable to her new role, where Judge Woods-Skipper is always looking to make the court system more accessible and efficient, and is open to suggestions from practitioners.

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