

10 QUESTIONS

for Judge Magdeline D. Coleman

U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT, EASTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

INTERVIEW BY ANTOINETTE R. STONE

It may appear unlikely that Magdeline D. Coleman, with roots in a rural Louisiana Cajun parish, would rise to her current position as a judge in the United States Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Judge Coleman was the eldest of 12 children in a family living in Church Point, La. Her father could barely read and she attended segregated Catholic schools until she reached high school. It was not the usual prescription for getting ahead in life. Yet, in spite of this humble background, Judge Coleman's story is one of success after success. Of course, it makes sense that she would reach the top of her profession. Her odyssey from Church Point, La. to 9th and Market streets is not part of a "Cinderella story," but rather the road followed by a woman who got a solid grounding in tenacity and hard work from her parents. It turns out that from an early age she knew exactly who she was and where she was going.

ANTOINETTE R. STONE: Tell me a little about your childhood.

JUDGE MAGDELINE COLEMAN: I was born and raised in Church Point, La., a very small town with a current population of about 5,000. When I lived there, the population was around 800. I lived an idyllic, practically carefree childhood. With 11 siblings and numerous cousins living nearby, I never lacked playmates. My ancestors included Creoles, and I remember speaking Creole with my grandmother, because she didn't speak English. I attended segregated Catholic schools until high school. I guess it was in sixth grade that I started to cause trouble. I kept finishing my work ahead of everybody else, and this annoyed the teacher, who considered me a disruption to the class. So I skipped seventh grade, with the result that I graduated from Church Point High School at the age of 16. I also caused some

trouble in high school by creating a situation that the school had never had to deal with before. My cousin Wayne and I finished with the highest grades in the senior class, as valedictorian and salutatorian. How could this be a problem? The problem was that the student body at

Church Point High was about 90 percent white and 10 percent black. It was embarrassing to the white majority that two black kids got the best grades, and rumors started circulating that Wayne and I actually "weren't that black." In retrospect, it seems hilarious that we caused such turmoil simply by getting the best grades.

How did you get from Church Point to Philadelphia?

One of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who ran the segregated elementary school, happened to be from Philadelphia, an alumna of Chestnut Hill College. She encouraged me to add Chestnut Hill College to Tulane, Xavier and the other colleges I was considering. When I was awarded a full scholarship, I accepted, especially since my cousin Wayne would be going to Penn (although he switched to Tulane at the last minute). I had a double major in economics and political science, and graduated



with a pretty high GPA. I also met the man I would end up marrying, Lloyd Wing, at a fraternity party at Penn, where he was a student.

What made you decide to become a lawyer?

There was never any question in my mind that I would become a lawyer. Like a lot of others, I was caught up in the romance of the Perry Mason stories, although I had never met a lawyer or even seen a lawyer. I assumed all lawyers were trial lawyers. So after graduation from Chestnut Hill, I started at Penn Law School. After I got to law school, I changed my mind about becoming a trial lawyer because I didn't think I had the right personality. Instead, I opted to go into tax law because I always had an aptitude for numbers and accounting. I intended to obtain my LL.M. in tax after graduation.

When did you start to practice law?

Well, reality intervened when my husband lost his job shortly after I graduated from law school. Also, by then we had a child to support. I had planned to work for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, but President Reagan froze federal hiring, and my job disappeared. We needed to earn a living so my husband and I started a cleaning and laundry business serving Penn students to pay the bills. It actually did quite well.

Eventually, I started looking for entry-level law jobs, and I worked for a succession of solo practitioners before joining Atkinson & Archie, the Philadelphia firm started by Nolan Atkinson and Bob Archie. When that firm merged with Duane Morris, I didn't go with them, but instead took a position doing bankruptcy work with the regional office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. I then accepted a clerkship with Judge David Scholl, a former judge in the Bankruptcy Court. At the end of the clerkship, I worked in private practice at Sagot, Jennings & Sigmund and then at Buchanan Ingersoll doing bankruptcy and creditors' rights work in Pennsylvania, New York and Delaware until I was appointed to the bench. Along the way, the family increased to seven children.

What are the children doing?

From the eldest to the youngest, they are a computer analyst at a charter school, an associate at Stradley Ronon, a nurse, a

sophomore at Moore College of Art, a junior at the University of Louisiana, a senior at the Baldwin School and an eighth grader at the Baldwin School.

You came from a large family. What are your siblings doing?

From the eldest (after me) to the youngest, they are an employee of the U.S. Postal Service, a 25-year adjuster at State Farm Insurance, a West Point graduate and officer in the U.S. Army, an oil company employee exploring for oil in Afghanistan, a retired officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, a pharmacist and officer in the U.S. Navy, an insurance company employee, a pharmacist in the U.S. Air Force and two physicians.



How has your life changed since your appointment to the bench?

Since my appointment to the bench, I think I have achieved a kind of calmness that I never found in private practice. Obviously, the job of a judge can be stressful, and I do feel the stress from time to time. But the stress that comes with this job is different from the stress that weighed on me in private practice. It is the knowledge that my decisions will have a significant impact on people's lives. In addition, I have more control over my daily life now, for the most part. Instead of leaving work for home at 8 p.m. or 9 p.m., I now leave for home at 7 p.m. I have time to have dinner with my family, to help with homework and to participate in my children's lives. I love my job, and work very hard at it.

How would you describe yourself as a judge?

The lawyers who appear before me on a regular basis know very well by now that I am a stickler for the rules. I insist that lawyers cite the rule or statute on which they are relying in their papers. If they make factual representations, I want to see some sort of proof. As for notice requirements, defective service will never get by me. I don't allow lawyers to cut corners, but I require no more from the lawyers who appear before me than I did of myself when I was in private practice. And, because I have had experience dealing with teenagers, I understand the importance of eliminating any possibility of ambiguity and boxing everyone in. I never tell my teenage children to be home by "curfew" because I don't want any argument over the definition of "curfew." Likewise, when a lawyer submits an order that requires something to

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happen in a certain number of days, I insist on a date certain. Not “14 days,” but rather “July 21, 2011.” That way everyone understands what is expected.

These are really common-sense rules. If people remember these simple things, life will be much easier for the lawyers, the clients and the court, continuances won’t be required as often and things will proceed more smoothly. I understand that the cases that are presented to me are important to the parties, and I work very hard every day to prepare my cases for the following day. The lawyers who appear before me know by now that I scrutinize everything and I research everything. One thing I do not like to hear is that you’ve been calling your adversary for days but he or she isn’t returning your calls. Very often, problems can be resolved if people simply talk with one another, so return phone calls from your colleagues to avoid wasting the court’s time and your time. I have to say, though, that 99 percent of the bankruptcy practitioners are civil with one another; it is a very collegial bar, and for the most part, we don’t have this kind of problem.

What has your experience been on the bench so far?

I think that so far, I have established a good rapport with the bankruptcy bar. In the beginning, I frequently would hear “With all due respect, Your Honor...” from lawyers. Now, you know that when someone begins a sentence with the expression “with all due respect,” you can be sure that person is about to level some criticism at you. So occasionally, in the beginning, I would hear this from lawyers who were trying to test me, but I don’t hear it so much anymore.

From my early days in Church Point, I learned to work hard and not give up. I still have a vivid memory of my father, who could barely read, making me sit at the kitchen table for hours, when

I was six years old, until I mastered an arithmetic problem. That kind of upbringing gave me a very strong work ethic and instilled confidence in me, and I think I always knew I would succeed. There were no other options.

What is your advice to the up-and-coming generation?

Be comfortable in your own skin, and love what you do. In addition, you should be willing to go outside of your comfort zone and seek out challenges and opportunities. For example, I volunteered to take the Delaware bar when Buchanan opened an office in Wilmington. This provided me with

the opportunity to work on large and sophisticated bankruptcy cases and in the Delaware Chancery Court. When bankruptcy work slowed, I gained admission to the New York bar. This allowed me to work with attorneys in various offices throughout the firm and practice in different areas of the law including commercial litigation. These experiences resulted in my appointment to the bench and provide me with the required knowledge to be an effective judge. ■

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