

Fall 2022

JUDICIAL LAW CLERKS' TRIBUTES TO A MENTOR

Ashanta E. Blackwell

Cecelia C. Oyola

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.law.mc.edu/lawreview>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blackwell, Ashanta E. and Oyola, Cecelia C. (2022) "JUDICIAL LAW CLERKS' TRIBUTES TO A MENTOR," *Mississippi College Law Review*. Vol. 40: Iss. 3, Article 15.

Available at: <https://dc.law.mc.edu/lawreview/vol40/iss3/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by MC Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mississippi College Law Review by an authorized editor of MC Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact walter@mc.edu.

JUDICIAL LAW CLERKS' TRIBUTES TO A MENTOR

Former Justice Banks Law Clerks

*Ashanta Evans Blackwell**

I write this note as a long overdue expression of thanks for an individual who propelled my pathway, along with many others, into a mission focused legal career. It is a known fact that Ret. Justice Fred L. Banks, Jr., served as local legal counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund during the late 1960's with several of his other legal partners. His commitment to Civil Rights and societal change didn't begin with his practicing law, it began as a young man when he first left Mississippi and *chose* to return to practice law in his home state.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision finding that segregated schools were unconstitutional was rendered in 1954 during Justice Banks's formative childhood years; that happened along with other pivotal Civil Rights moments. Upon graduating from high school, he left to attend Howard University for his undergraduate degree and law degree. His decision to return encapsulates who Justice Banks is a person: a man using the law for its original purpose of ensuring that America lives into what it promises to all its citizens—equality. For the entirety of his life, Justice Banks has worked with intentionality to create a better society for us all.

In many ways, I want to be selfish and believe that my engagement with Justice Banks was singularly focused on my personal development as a lawyer. I understand that is not fully accurate. I recognize that the insights and learnings I received as a law clerk were insights that Justice Banks generously shared with many others in the Mississippi community and widely in the legal field. He has influenced a pipeline of lawyers who have been directed by what he modeled—finding your own path, being committed to what is right and just, and becoming leaders in our own right. Justice Banks has always demonstrated deep legal acumen, and acerbic wit, when engaging with others. His ability to be such a contemplative thinker, focusing on keen details, influenced my approach to managing complex legal matters to this day. My work with him as a law clerk has benefited me professionally and personally, and it does me the great honor to have this opportunity to share my gratitude for the privilege of working with him.

* Ashanta Evans Blackwell serves as Vice President, Deputy General Counsel for Teach For America, Inc.

*Cecelia C. Oyola**

It was an honor and a privilege to clerk for Justice Banks, one that I shall always cherish. I will never forget when he called to make the clerkship offer. I had already accepted a clerkship with a circuit court judge, and the call from Justice Banks had come, ahem, later than expected—the week of my law school graduation. I remember nervously thanking him before finally working up the courage to tell him about the other offer. I apologized and told him that I was conflicted over what to do. He responded graciously before saying something to the effect of: “Well, if that’s what you *really* want to do.” As is typical with his sense of humor, I can’t always tell when he’s joking. Needless to say, the other judge with whom I had accepted was understanding, and we have all laughed about it in the years since.

Simply put, Justice Banks is so much more than the second African American to sit on Mississippi’s highest court, which is no small feat. He is a true legal scholar. His intelligence and judicial temperament are matched by few. When I started practicing law, an attorney, who had appeared before him often, told me that he thought that Justice Banks was one of the smartest to ever sit on the bench when I mentioned that I had clerked for him. I don’t think I’ve ever told him that, but I wholeheartedly agree. It’s been over twenty years, and I still apply the things that he taught me today. There is so much more I want to say, but words fail me. I am simply honored to me a member of his clerkship class.

* Cecelia C. Oyola serves as a career law clerk for Magistrate Judge LaKeysha Greer Isaac of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi.