

Nevada African American Trailblazing Attorney “Firsts”

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BY BRYAN K. SCOTT, ESQ.

Since 1976, every U.S. president has officially recognized and designated February as “Black History Month.” For me and other African Americans, black history is not just during the shortest month of the year. It is every day of every month of every year of our lives. Black history is not only the history of African Americans. **It is the history of all Americans, and our contributions deserve regular recognition as part of the fabric of our great nation. African American culture is an integral part of American culture.**

State Bar of Nevada Board of Governors President Eric Dobberstein has made diversity, equity and inclusion his platform. It is also the theme for this year’s Annual Meeting. On Sept. 1, 2020, the State Bar of Nevada’s Board of Governors issued a “Statement on Diversity, Inclusion and Justice For All,” which can be found on the state bar’s website at www.nvbar.org/news-and-publications/news/. When I was chairman of the State Bar’s diversity committee, I discovered that the state bar tracked attorney gender, practice areas and location of



practice, but it did not keep track of their ethnicity. During my tenure, the state bar created a voluntary way for attorneys to self-identify their ethnicity – through a box on the dues renewal form. This information is important to determine. Being a diverse profession allows attorneys to reflect the cultures, values and diversity of our clients, and bring different cultural, racial ethnic and other gender perspectives to bear in order to more effectively solve problems for our clients, the community and the country.

In 2019, of the approximately 9,500 attorneys in Nevada, 3,864 responded to the survey. Of those responding, 0.7 percent identified themselves as American Indian/Native American, 4 percent as Asian, 2.7 percent as Black/African American, 81.7 percent as Caucasian, 5.2 percent as Hispanic, 0.8 percent as Middle Eastern, 2.4 percent as mixed race, 0.5 percent as Pacific Islander and 2 percent as other. Recently, I have noticed through specialty bars, such as the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association, the Las Vegas Latino Bar Association and the Asian Bar Association of Las Vegas, that the number of attorneys of color has increased significantly from when I started

practicing law in 1991. The latest round of judicial elections has also added more women and people of color to Nevada's judicial ranks.

My February 2021 Black History Month column in *Nevada Lawyer* focused on southern Nevada Attorney "firsts." In this article, I recognize additional southern Nevada "firsts" as well as three very deserving northern Nevada trailblazing "firsts." While the northern population of our state is significantly less diverse than southern Nevada, the accomplishments of these trailblazers are arguably more significant. In a 2012 *Nevada Lawyer* article, these pioneering trailblazers were recognized, but their accomplishments deserve further recognition. You can find the original article at https://www.nvbar.org/wp-content/uploads/NevLawyer_2012_Bar_None-1.pdf.

Reno Municipal Court Judge Kenneth R. Howard was the first and only African American judge to sit on the Reno Municipal Court. Judge Howard was elected by the citizens of Reno for three six-year terms from 1999 until his retirement in 2016. Prior to his election to the bench, he worked in private practice and for six years in the Washoe County District Attorney's Office, eventually becoming a chief deputy district attorney. As a judge, he founded the Fresh Start Therapeutic Drug Court.

Additionally, we recognize in memoriam Reno attorney David Dean – the first African American attorney practicing in Reno. He began practicing law there in 1974, nine years after Nevada passed the Civil Rights Act. After clerking for Judge Peter Breen, Dean passed the Nevada Bar Exam in 1974 and was a general practitioner. He practiced law until six months before his death at age 52 on September 30, 1986.

We further recognize in memoriam Reno attorney Gemma Greene Waldron. Waldron was the first African American female attorney in Reno. She served as an attorney for the Public Utilities Commission and was a deputy

district attorney for Washoe County before going into private practice.

Other notable trailblazers include:

- Attorney Terry Johnson, who became the first African American Labor Commissioner for the state of Nevada in 1999;
- Attorney Tyre Gray, who is currently serving as the first African American president of the Nevada Mining Association; and
- Attorney Berna Rhodes-Ford, who is the first African American hired as general counsel of a Nevada college or university (Nevada State College).

Being an African American attorney in Nevada for almost 30 years has been a truly unique experience. At times it has been frustrating (glass ceilings), humbling (when not being readily recognized as a legal professional) and lonely (being one of few, if not the only person of color at legal events). Today, as an African American attorney, I am exhilarated to see and acknowledge all the African American trailblazing attorneys who came before me and the current African American and other attorneys of color who continue to break glass ceilings.

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