

Court System Celebrates Black History Month

New York County Celebration

This year, as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, New York State's Unified Court System presented a Black History Month program on February 7th, dedicated to what First Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Lawrence Marks described as "principles of equal justice and diversity we cherish in our society and our court system."

Sergeant Eugene Jordan, a 31-year veteran of the New York State Courts who serves as a uniformed court officer, grew up in Queens but traveled down south, as a teenager, during the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement. Jordan delivered opening remarks. "I saw people being flushed off the street with fire hoses and being bitten by dogs." Although the momentous

events of those days are documented mostly in black and white (through news footage), Sgt. Jordan remembers that time in living and breathing color. "We must reach out to young folks," he urged the audience gathered at the New York City Criminal Courthouse at 100 Centre Street, "so they know how important it is to be involved. If they don't know, we all lose."

Deputy Chief Administrative Judge of the New York City Courts Fern Fisher then introduced the man she called "the quiet and gentle wind beneath all our wings," George Bundy Smith. A retired New York State Court of Appeals judge, Smith graduated from Yale Law School in 1959, where he and his sister were the only two African-Americans enrolled. Born in the ninth ward in New Orleans, Judge Smith grew up in Washington, D.C., when it was completely segregated. Smith, who, as a young man, took part in the Freedom Ride from Atlanta, Georgia to Montgomery, Alabama was the recipient of the Tribune Society's Lifetime Achievement Award. The mission of the Tribune Society is to consistently improve the administration of justice and ensure equal opportunity for all who work in or are served by the New York State Unified Court System.

The Tribune Society's Community Service Award was presented to Cheryl Wills, NY 1 television anchor and author. Wills recently published a book called *Die Free*, the story of her great-great-grandfather, a runaway slave who was bought at auction as a child and fought for the Union Army. As a teen, he escaped from Tennessee to Kentucky to fight in the Civil War. "He fought because he knew it was the right thing to do," said Wills.



Front row: Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient, Hon. George Bundy Smith; Community Service Award Recipient and NY1 Anchor, Cheryl Wills

Standing: Members of the New York State Unified Court System's Black History Month Committee, from left to right: Frank Tropea, Ernest Owens, Barry Clarke, Esq., Hon. Antonio Brandveen, Ta-Tanisha James, Esq., John W. Stubbs III, Joseph Parris

CONTINUED...

Court System Celebrates Black History Month *CONTINUED*

During the process of researching her family, which Wills said was “humbling,” she found that her great-great-great grandfather had married Emma, also a former slave, upon his return from service. He and his wife became sharecroppers, had nine children and cherished their newfound freedom. When her husband died, Emma was not given a widow’s pension from the army, so she hired a lawyer to represent her against the war department. She won the suit and signed her name in the form of an X on the legal document providing her with the pension she had fought to receive. Wills said that she, herself, now deliberately signs her own name in the most “curvaceous way possible.”



Judge Woodard, recognized for her Extraordinary Commitment to Justice.

Black History Month in Nassau County

“Everyone benefits from learning black history,” said State Supreme Court Justice Michele M. Woodard, honored at the Nassau County Courts’ Black History Month celebration in Mineola on the last Friday in February.



Cheryl Davis and Hon. Tricia M. Ferrell

Woodard was recognized, along with Court Clerk Specialist Cheryl Davis and activist attorney Frederick Brewington, in a packed courtroom at the State Supreme Court Building in Mineola. In 2000, Woodard, a former state assistant attorney general, became the first black woman elected a State Supreme Court Justice on Long Island. Judge Woodard, in her acceptance of the Alfred S. Robbins Award, singled out the young people in the audience. “Without programs like this, you might never have known who these leaders are,” she said, “and you can be one too.”

Cheryl Davis began her career with the courts as a court officer in 1991. She received the Longevity and Endurance Award. “It is my pleasure to help the public navigate and accomplish their goals in the court system” said Davis, upon receiving this recognition.