

## **The Honorable Inez Reid – The Road Less Traveled**

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Back at the start of my internship at the Attorney General for the District of Columbia, I had the pleasure of meeting Judge Inez Reid at the Washington Bar Association's 2014 Annual Conference. Despite her highly respected position as a judge on the DC Court of Appeals, she was very humble. I immediately realized that my internship was right across the street from her chambers, so I made it a priority to meet with her for coffee, which resulted in an unforgettable thirty-minute discussion filled with invaluable wisdom.

In this first of two meetings with Judge Reid, she shared with me three simple tips that were overlooked by many law students. First, she urged me to ensure that I take the bar very serious while preparing. Her second tip was to “be patient.” Judge Reid pointed out how so many law students want to start making the “top dollar” right out of law school, and many of these law students end up joining law firms for the money, ultimately hating their work-life balance, or lack thereof. Last, and most notably, she emphasized the importance of being adaptive in this challenging job market, to take on challenging positions, and to understand that I may very well have to temporarily take a “second choice” job.

This advice was clever, yet simple, and the exact encouragement I needed to reevaluate my expectations as I approached my final year of law school. To my disbelief, as I would soon come to discover, Judge Reid's timeless advice stemmed from her own life experiences! Judge Reid has an amazing story that is of a young black woman who overcame racism and sexism on her unique journey to becoming a judge for the DC Court of Appeals. It all started in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1937, where Judge Inez Reid (Inez Smith) and her twin brother, George Smith, were born. At the age of two or three, Judge Reid's mother returned to her segregated hometown, Washington, D.C., with Judge Reid and her brothers; the siblings lived with their mother, grandmother, and great uncle. It was in this black community, that Judge Reid was surrounded by a nurturing community, which was comprised of church, school, and family. Reid said that, while growing up, family was the center of everything.

Judge Reid grew up in an old fashioned time, what I would like to call the “good ol' days,” when families spent time together, not time on social media. There was no television and Sundays meant going to church, visiting relatives, and staying home for a nice quiet Sunday evening. Her family's economic situation was poor; however, there was a premium on education and “the need to keep going.”

During these times, the segregated black Northeast D.C. was providing its children wonderful educations; however, a large number of highly educated blacks could not get jobs due to racism. The by-product of this was high schools like Dunbar High School, Judge Reid's alma mater, receiving faculty members who received Masters and Ph.Ds. from prestigious universities. These teachers came to teach high school students that were motivated and inspired, and Judge Reid, in a sense, became the beneficiary of a racist system that denied these high school professors employment in the sectors that they originally targeted.

As a result, Judge Reid began studying French in elementary school and eventually became fluent. Additionally, Judge Reid's high school education gave her a wonderful foundation in Latin. Lack of motivation was not an issue for Judge Reid, as the culture of Dunbar High School was electric. Dunbar students were constantly being reminded of the

students that came before them and achieved greatness. Additionally, Judge Reid had access to many of the Dunbar alumni throughout her community. In the church alone, Judge Reid had access to high school and Howard University students and professors.

As one could assume, Judge Reid did not get very much exposure to other races while growing up in segregated Washington, D.C. Judge Reid's only exposure to whites, until college, was the "Jewish people who owned the corner store." Judge Reid's decision to attend college<sup>1</sup> opened the world up to her as she was able to encounter gifted individuals of all races at Tufts University. Upon entering Tufts as a sophomore, Judge Reid never intended to become an attorney. Rather, she only endeavored to get a well-rounded education. During her time at Tufts, Judge Reid studied Sociology, English, Literature, Philosophy, and Religion.

It was during Judge Reid's senior year at Tufts University that her brother, George, who was now finishing his final year at Yale, asked her to attend Yale law school with him. Once admitted, Judge Reid and her brother were reunited and they became the only two black students in their class at Yale Law School. Here, Judge Reid and her brother were commonly mistaken as the school's clerical staff or janitor, respectively. Despite this challenge, Judge Reid's experience at Yale Law School was rather positive.<sup>2</sup> Judge Reid boasts of Yale's "great professors, great courses, and the hard work that was required."

Judge Reid explained that the students were generally pretty cordial, even though there were the few racists who were at Yale as well. One of which went so far as to call the Ku Klux Klan "nothing but a mere 'social club'" during a Torts class. Nevertheless, there were students who were especially kind to Judge Reid during her time at Yale, such as James O. Freidman, the late, former President of Dartmouth College.

In Judge Reid's third year of law school, she was approached by the Associate Dean of the law school, who was a white southerner. The Dean said that she and her brother were not going to get hired by any law firms and that they should look into government opportunities. Accordingly, Judge Reid started looking into "back-up" opportunities, just in case this Dean was right. She applied to two opportunities, one of which was a government opportunity that hired a woman the prior year but would likely hire a man that year. She ended up jobless post-graduation. Fortunately, she applied for a Ford Foundation Foreign Area Training Fellowship and enrolled in a masters' degree program in political science at U.C.L.A., with a concentration in African Studies, and anticipated studying in Africa the following year. However, Yale Law School asked her to consider a position, partially funded by the Ford Foundation and partially funded by the Congolese government, in Congo/Leopoldville, Africa to teach students studying to become Magistrate Judges.

Life being the unpredictable journey that it is, Judge Reid found herself using her fluency in French to teach the law in French to judges in Congo/Leopoldville during a Civil War. Putting aside the bombings that were occurring downtown and the rules, curfews, and occurrences that really can only happen during a war; Judge Reid loved the experience. She enjoyed being apart of the little community of educators that lived down there.

One would assume that by going to Africa, Judge Reid would have escaped racism; however, this was unfortunately not the case. Congo/Brazzaville, the Republic of the Congo, and Congo/Leopoldville, now Congo/Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo,

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<sup>1</sup> Judge Reid first attended Howard University and then matriculated at Tufts University.

<sup>2</sup> While at Yale, Judge Reid roomed with Eleanor Holmes Norton, fellow Dunbar High School alum and now the District of Columbia's Delegate to Congress, and also befriended and lived with popular law figure, Mariam Wright Edelman, who now heads the Children's Defense Fund.

was colonized by the French and Belgians, respectively. The colonization of this land for its precious raw materials led to the brutal treatment and near enslavement of the locals. By the time Judge Reid arrived, there was still a large black population that was underserved and in need of a formal educational structure. Judge Reid, as an educated African American and a foreigner to Congo, had a unique lens to look through as she worked with the largely French management of the legal education program. While teaching in the French language, Judge Reid had to stay two-steps ahead of her supervisor; an egotistical; condescending French law professor/ administrator at the National School of Law and Administration who believed that the European education system was superior to the United States.

What many of Reid's European colleagues did not get to see, largely due to their misconception of the African race as monolithic, was the tensions between tribes within Congo. This is highlighted by one episode where Judge Reid was approached by a scared Congolese member of the administration who asked her for her help getting protection due to issues in connection with the ethnic tensions that were happening at the time within Congo.

Truly Judge Reid's time in Congo was unlike any other experience she had ever encountered. Just eight years earlier, she had hardly encountered any whites in her life; now she was flying back to the United States after working with European law professors to teach criminal law to Congolese judges. Though Judge Reid did not escape the racism that she encountered in the United States by going to Africa, she did open up the world to herself, literally.

With a new-found vigor for education, in addition to an unforgiving job market for black law school graduates, Judge Reid went straight into education. Reid started a 12-year teaching career, which started at the State University of New York. During these years she enrolled at Columbia University's Graduate School and eventually taught at Lehman College, Hunter College, Brooklyn College, and Barnard of Columbia University.

Judge Reid found satisfaction in the work that she was doing as a teacher, but desired to work in the international realm. Reid got involved with different non-government organizations that focused on black women's issues and community development. Through this work Judge Reid encountered and was referred by a white woman to her husband who was a managing partner at a law firm. When Reid met with the man for an interview, the managing partner told the Yale Law School graduate that she could only have a job opening junk mail! Judge Reid declined the offer.

It was while Judge Reid was teaching at Columbia University's Barnard College in the late 1970's, when her brother called, urging her to take on an opportunity to justify her law degree. Shortly after, Judge Reid took a leave of absence from Barnard to serve as General Counsel for the New York State Division for Youth. It was not too long after her work at the New York State Division for Youth that Judge Reid got her big break. Judge Reid was called by President Carter's administration and offered the position as Deputy General Counsel for Regulation Review of the old federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Her move to D.C. seemed to be not only a home coming, but also good luck, as she was soon thereafter called by the Carter administration again and offered the position of Inspector General of the Environmental Protection Agency, which required Reid to bring together accountants and investigators. The job was challenging and pushed her to learn quickly and get out of her comfort zone, which was very rewarding.

Just when Judge Reid's career seemed to be filled with endless possibility, President Regan was elected and Judge Reid found out through an announcement on television that she, and all of the other Inspector Generals which served under the Carter Administration,

were fired. She arrived at work to be told, “Inez, you’re fired.” Judge Reid simply walked across the street and applied to Corporation Counsel for the District of Columbia (now Attorney General, District of Columbia). She was hired as a law clerk and, through hard work and dedication, rose through the ranks until eventually becoming Corporation Counsel.

Just Reid practiced with a couple of law firms and eventually was called by her twin brother, who was then a judge in New York, and through a series of events was given the opportunity to go on the bench. She is now a judge for the D.C. Court of Appeals, a true success story, as a woman who overcame incredible odds.

Judge Reid’s career had its fair share of setbacks. As law students, we are afraid of not getting a job at a law firm or government agency straight out of law school. Well, Judge Reid had to pursue a completely different profession for 13 years due to racism and sexism. Judge Reid simply stated that, “you can never lose sight of reaching your ultimate goal, even if you don’t know what the end goal is yet.” She also encourages students to take on all opportunities and learn on the job. She is also a big advocate of participating in Bar Associations and networking.

We can learn a lot from Judge Reid’s story, but a few things really stuck out to me. Judge Reid was forced to teach for over a decade before she could practice law. By the time she was actually able to practice law, the learning curve was lessened and she went on to still have an amazing career, which she continues to enjoy to this day. Judge Reid demonstrated poise and resilience as she bounced back, time and time again, from set backs; from being fired as Inspector General of the Environmental Protection Agency, to even “the break-up” of the first law firm that she joined. Judge Reid has proven that what determines success is one’s interpretation of and response to failure. Judge Reid truly is a symbol of courage and embodies the concept of the lawyer being a life-long learner, which is evidenced by her pursuit of a range of traditional and non-traditional challenging opportunities with the odds stacked against her.

Last, but definitely not least, Judge Reid’s story demonstrates that “[we] are always being watched.” Judge Reid tirelessly developed herself professionally and brought a tenacious work effort to every position that she ever held. As we know, people were watching her and assessing her at every level. Due to her work product and professionalism, she was tapped for opportunities on several occasions by the President’s administration, and to this day sits on the bench of the D.C. Court of Appeals, the highest court in the District of Columbia.

In the District of Columbia, Judge Reid is an unsung hero and a trailblazer for the next generation of attorneys. Her achievements serve as a reminder of the progress that has been made in diversity and inclusion, and provides a reminder of the progress that can still be made. I hope that we can all take the principles that Judge Reid has lived by, as well as the humility and patience that Judge Reid has demonstrated throughout her career, and apply them to our careers. Perhaps then we can see how beautiful a career in law can be, even if it is on the road less traveled.

### **About the Author**

Mark Wade Jr., JD, MBA is a candidate for both the New York and New Jersey bar. He was awarded a Doctor of Jurisprudence and Master of Business Administration from American University and earned his Bachelor of Arts from Columbia University. Mark is interested in Securities and Corporate Tax and will be clerking for the Honorable Joshua D. Novin at the Tax Court of New Jersey. Mark is a member of the American Bar Association and serves as

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