

AAPL EXAMINER



American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law

Her Honor: My Life on the Bench – What Works, What’s Broken, How to Change it

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It was an honor and a pleasure to dine with the Honorable LaDoris Hazzard Cordell before her lunch talk at AAPL. A true “groundbreaker,” Judge Cordell is the first African American woman to sit on the Superior Court of Northern California. Before becoming a lawyer, Judge Cordell graduated from Antioch College with a BA. She then received her JD from Stanford Law School in 1974. In 1975, Cordell was the first person in the Western United States to serve as the Earl Warren Intern at the [NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund](#). From 1976 to 1982, she practiced as a private attorney in [East Palo Alto](#), California, specializing in criminal defense law, personal injury law, family law, and federal civil rights law. From 1978 to 1982, she was assistant dean for Student Affairs at Stanford Law School.

She was appointed to the bench in 1982 by Gov. “Jerry” Brown and served as a Municipal Court judge. She was the first California judge to order alcohol interlocks on cars for drivers convicted of a DUI offense. She was elevated to the Superior Court in 1988 and was the Supervising Judge for Probate Court from 1994-1995, supervising judge of Family Court from 1990-1992 and presiding judge of the Superior Appellate Court in 1993.

Judge Cordell entertained and educated our AAPL audience with the telling of her own life’s story and shared her insights from her tenure as a Judge. As she said: “Being the first black woman judge in northern California meant pressure, lots of it. There was pressure from black and brown communities who were counting on me to demonstrate that people who looked like them were up to the task. There was pressure from the governor’s office that I not embarrass him. And there was pressure from some of the mostly male prosecutors and law enforcement officers with whom they worked, as well as the good ole’ boy judges on my court, who anticipated that I would fail, offering further proof that people who looked like me were unqualified to work in their world.”

Many of her stories are available in her book: [Her Honor: My Life on the Bench...What Works, What's Broken, and How to Change It](#). Her presentation was entertaining, provocative, and opened a window into the hearts and minds of judges. She shared

thoughts about what information can be helpful to a trier of fact and how conclusionary reports are not beneficial. Her willingness to show her own vulnerability, especially early in her career and when handling difficult cases involving aberrant behavior and mental health issues, was appreciated.

Judge Cordell focused extensively on her firsthand knowledge and experience of the prejudice that has permeated our legal system. Still, she believes in the system. From ending school segregation to legalizing same-sex marriage, its progress relies on legal professionals, experts, and jurors who strive to make the imperfect system as fair as possible.

For every member who will ever appear before a judge, it's an easy read, and one I can highly recommend. To learn something about how a judge evaluates cases and experts can only make us more effective in our own work as experts. Her candor is refreshing and the depth of her character shines through. *Her Honor* is a good read; she is an excellent speaker who reeled in the audience as would a great angler landing a fighting trout; and her insights are well worth the price of admission.