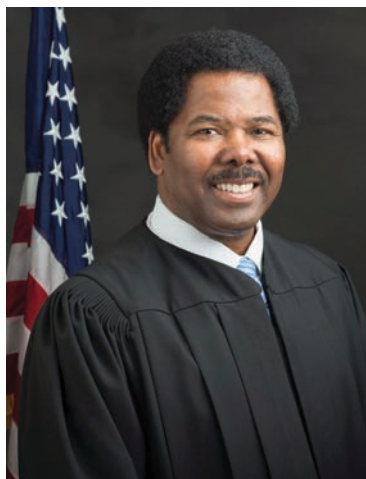


PROFILE

by Judge Mary Thornton House (Ret.)

New Leadership at the Los Angeles Superior Court

The Honorable Kevin Brazile and Eric Taylor are 2019-2020 presiding judge and assistant presiding judge at LASC



“HISTORIC.” “A LEGACY

of firsts.” These phrases describe the election of Los Angeles Superior Court Judges Kevin Brazile and Eric Taylor when they ascended as the 2019/2020 leaders for the Los Angeles Superior Court. It started somewhat quietly in October 2016 when Judge Kevin Brazile was elected assistant presiding judge, second in command to then Presiding Judge Daniel Buckley. He became the first African-American to hold the position in the history of the LASC. Then, in September 2018, unchallenged, he became the first African-American presiding judge of the court. With Judge Eric Taylor’s election as assistant presiding judge, they thus form the first African-American LASC presiding judge and assistant presiding judge team. Looking forward, Judge Brazile said he feels blessed to have the support of colleagues who elected him and his assistant presiding judge: “We’re the best of the best, we’re

one team, one family, one court.”

Judge Brazile is no stranger to being a “first.” Encouraged by his family and especially his Los Angeles County sheriff brother, he was the first member of his family to graduate from college, thus to graduate from law school and to become a lawyer. These accomplishments—combined with his appointment to the Los Angeles Superior Court by Governor Gray Davis in 2003—were both historic and personal legacies for him and his family, and subsequently for the community as a whole.

Judge Rupert Byrdsong, past president, lifetime member, and current board member at-large of the John M. Langston Bar Association, speaks of “exceptional pride” upon congratulating Judges Brazile and Taylor in becoming the first African-Americans to be elected presiding judge and assistant presiding judge, both together and separately. “To see these outstanding judges

After 22 years on the Los Angeles Superior Court, the Honorable Mary Thornton House retired and now works as a private mediator for Alternative Resolution Centers. She also is a member of the Los Angeles Lawyer Editorial Board.



Images courtesy of the Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles

Los Angeles Superior Court Presiding Judge Kevin C. Brazile

in the top leadership positions is even more significant to me personally because they approached me to encourage me to submit my application to the bench. Both judges are committed to making the Los Angeles Superior Court accessible to everyone.”

However, Judge Brazile’s personal achievements were hard fought. He graduated cum laude from UCLA in 1980 and then from the law school in 1983, but to pay for school Judge Brazile worked an eclectic grouping of part-time evening and weekend jobs: clothing salesman, gardener, mover, and box loader. Economics were not the only barrier as he revealed: “Growing up, I had so many people telling me what I couldn’t do, I decided to ignore them and to just listen to those that encouraged me. I ignored the naysayers.” His motto of “prove them wrong with a smile on your face” remains a personal mantra underpinning the basis of his success.

Judge Brazile began his career as a member of the Los Angeles Office of the County Counsel and remained until his appointment

to the bench. There, he was the first African-American lawyer to become division chief of the General Litigation Section, a position in which he supervised all litigation for the county counsel office, including high-profile police abuse and employment matters. Hands on, he argued cases before the Ninth Circuit and California Courts of Appeal. In February 1999, he successfully argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Conn v. Gabbert*,* convincing the nation’s highest court to reverse the lower court ruling.

Los Angeles County Counsel Mary Wickham described Judge Brazile as a brilliant lawyer, a dedicated public servant, and always willing to mentor new lawyers. “He was a tremendous resource here for new lawyers coming up—he always had time for them, helping them as they started out.” She said she is equally pleased that Judge Eric Taylor—another alumnus from the county counsel’s office—was elected assistant presiding judge. This is also the first time a former member of the county counsel’s office has been elected presiding judge.

Saying that it is “remarkable that there are now two former members” as part of the LASC top leadership team, Wickham explained: “To know that we have a partner in the court is significant; there are always times of crisis, and we work with the courts a lot. It’s thrilling to know that we will have folks at the helm that are approachable, capable, skilled at what they do, in combination with team player characteristics for the next four years.”

The LASC works for the county’s more than 10 million residents who live in 88 cities and 140 unincorporated areas, utilizing the services of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Office and 46 police departments. The LASC is responsible for the largest caseload in the country with 40 courthouses spread over 4000 square miles from Pomona to Santa Monica and Lancaster to Long Beach. As presiding judge, Judge Brazile is responsible for operations in all 40 courthouses, over 600 judicial officers, and close to 5000 employees. What prepared Judge Brazile to preside over the largest trial court in the

country, possibly the world?

The commitment of presiding judge and assistant presiding judge is for four years, two as assistant presiding judge and two as presiding judge. It is the quintessential on-the-job training stint. Judge Brazile also has the distinction of working in two districts (East and North Central) as well as Central, presiding over criminal and civil assignments. Moreover, prior to his election as assistant presiding judge, Judge Brazile held significant leadership positions during a time of great turmoil as both assistant and supervising judge of Civil Operations. In 2012, the LASC experienced budget cuts of historic proportions, requiring a consolidation of resources and the elimination of many services.

Judge Brazile described this time period as a “real low.” His duties put him in charge of over 250,000 civil filings a year in general/unlimited civil, unlawful detainers, and small claims, set in courtrooms destined for reduction because of the law’s priority given to criminal operations. “I learned about the court when we went through consolidation because we had to look not just at civil but how it impacted all the other disciplines. This gave me an understanding of what the whole court was about,” he said. “I had to work really closely with our administrative staff. This was a watershed moment because I learned how talented the Superior Court staff was.”

Judge Brazile’s leadership style evolved from these experiences. As the court and its multimillion customer base and budget would rank it in the top 10 businesses in the county, delegation and teamwork comprise his leadership style. Calling it the “team approach,” he said, “I don’t like to micro-manage. I lead from the front.” His group of supervising judges comprise the equivalent of a firm’s managing partners, as they head up the 13 districts in the court’s organizational structure. What is unique, however, is that from the presiding judge on down, the “managing” is of equal, independently elected judges. This requires a presiding judge to select judges he trusts and are trusted by their colleagues. He acknowledged that it is his job to “support

them, have good communication, and let them do their job.” Northwest District’s Supervising Judge Huey Cotton best sums it up: “The amazing thing about Kevin is that he leads with his heart and has an abiding passion for this court that convinces me that he will always do the right thing to make this a better institution than it has ever been.”

Judge Brazile’s second-in-command, Assistant Presiding Judge Eric Taylor, squarely fits his membership model for his leadership team. Judge Brazile has known his assistant presiding judge for almost 28 years and describes their relationship as follows: “He’s like a brother to me. We are going to have a great partnership because we are in this together, he and I. Our trust and friendship will guarantee success.”

Judge Taylor agreed: “I couldn’t think of anyone I’d rather serve with than my friend, Kevin. I’ve known him for more than half my life from a time even before our children were born. He is one of the best lawyers I’ve ever met and one of the kindest people. We have worked well together since the time we met at the county counsel’s office. What makes this so special for me is that his level of commitment, thoughtfulness, and dedication is a perfect match with my vision of what the court needs.”

When asked what are the biggest challenges the LASC faces in the years to come, Judge Brazile readily answered: “Technology and funding.” On the issue of technology, the court is in a multi-year transition from its antiquated DOS-based computer system to one that can benefit judges, the court staff, attorneys, and the public. Former Presiding Judge Dan Buckley’s mantra to judicial officers and staff was to “be patient, be positive.” Judge Brazile recognizes that the challenge is two-fold: getting the new technology “right” and then implementing it. Educating Los Angeles judicial officers with an age range of late thirties to late eighties is a challenge. Therefore, along with the “be patient, be positive” approach, Judge Brazil promises that “nobody will be left behind.”

On the funding issue, the past three presiding judges have worked tirelessly to

restore what was lost during the 2012-2014 horrific budget cuts. That commitment does not end with them. It is one of the highest priorities for 2019-2020 for Judge Brazile who acknowledged that “we’re coming back gradually.” However, using a vivid analogy, Judge Brazile relates the state of the court to an injured patient: “The patient is critical, still critical, but the bleeding has been stopped and now the patient is in rehab.” Fearing another down cycle would hurt the court, he is driven to maintain his already established and close relationships with the County Board of Supervisors, the California Legislature, and the attorney community, as well as to forge new relationships with those that can assist the court.

Judge Brazile is effusive in his praise and admiration for the continuing support from Los Angeles County Bar Association and other bar groups during this difficult time period: “The LACBA has been so helpful with the budget crunch. We would not have made it through without their understanding and support. They lobbied the legislature, they made sacrifices, didn’t really complain, and simply rolled up their sleeves and really helped us.” He also acknowledged that along with the LACBA, the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles, the American Board of Trial Advocates, the Open Court Coalition, the San Fernando Valley Bar Association, the Mexican American Bar Association, and the Langston Bar Association worked together by “stepping up whenever we said we needed help, support, and to get information out—they were all there for us.”

The admiration and trust Judge Brazile engenders is evident in his many activities outside the courthouse, of which only a few are mentioned here. As a member of the California Judicial Council, he served as a past co-chair with Justice Laurie Zelon of the California Judicial Council’s Access and Fairness Advisory Committee. His networking with the Black Legislative Caucus resulted in an invitation to their recent 50th anniversary celebration. He has been a board member of the California Judges Association, representing not only Los Angeles County but also judges statewide.



Los Angeles Superior Court Assistant Presiding Judge Eric Taylor

In the category of leadership objectives called “winning hearts and minds,” Judge Brazile hit the ground running during his tenure as assistant presiding judge. Aware that a challenge to a sitting judge in this county requires campaigning at a huge cost to his colleagues, he created and promoted a political action committee for the benefit of Los Angeles judges who are facing election challenges—the LAJ-PAC—to build up a fund for use by sitting judges that are challenged.

On his own time and after court hours, Judge Brazile put together a committee comprised of sitting and retired judges, retained legal assistance, and promoted informational, countywide receptions to introduce the PAC. Judges who join the PAC are asked to pay a small, minimum amount per month or more into the fund. At the six-month mark of its quiet rollout, over half of LASC’s judges had signed up.

Once word is out, that number and amount of PAC resources is expected to climb. Indeed, when asked of which “first” he is most proud, Judge Brazile responded it was the PAC, “simply because it will last, benefits the judges, and will keep on going and be strong when I am retired and gone.” Truly, it is and will be a historic and enduring legacy for him.

Judge Brazile’s passions also stem from his life experiences. He will talk to any group anywhere upon request and through the court’s various outreach programs and bar programs. He especially enjoys talking with young men and women in high school and college to motivate them: “If you don’t see anybody that looks like you, you think it’s out of reach to be a lawyer or a judge. People are telling you what you can’t do, so telling students that ‘I did it and so can you’ is my way of giving back.” He wants to make sure that people of color can

go to law school and become judges. “Hopefully, I won’t be the last African-American judge.”

Anyone who meets or works with Judge Brazile agrees that he is indefatigably cheerful, upbeat, and positive. When asked where this outlook on life originated, he replied, “I’ve always thought to achieve goals, you have to have a positive attitude, you have to have the belief that you will succeed, and if you don’t have it, you won’t make it. You’ve got to believe that it’s going to happen and then you work towards it.” He gives backhanded credit to his naysayers: “People who told me I couldn’t do something motivated me to prove them wrong and, in way, they were responsible for my success. They may not know it. There were a lot of those folks, so there’s lots of credit to give out.” And, there is that smile.

*Conn v. Gabbert, 526 U.S. 286 (1999).