

Meet the Honorable Bernice Bouie Donald: A Trailblazer of Justice and Service



By Grace John

Growing up in DeSoto County, Mississippi, Judge Bernice Bouie Donald was one of ten children. She attended segregated schools until her senior year in 1967, when she became one of the first students to integrate Olive Branch High School. “Those years were not easy — opportunities for mentorship and scholarship information were withheld from me,” she recalled. “Despite the obstacles, I applied to and was accepted by the university then known as Memphis State.”

That opportunity, she says, changed her life. “My experience at the University of Memphis transported me beyond my circumstances and introduced me to a world I didn’t know existed. That education became the launching point of my career in law and service to my community.”

Donald earned her sociology degree in 1974, her Juris Doctor from the UofM School of Law in 1979, and soon began work with Memphis Area Legal Services and the Public Defender’s Office. From there, she broke barrier after barrier. In 1982, she became the first Black woman elected to Tennessee’s General Sessions Criminal Court. Just six years later, she made history again as the first Black woman in the nation to serve as a federal bankruptcy judge. Appointments from Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama followed, elevating her to the U.S. District Court and then the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.

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Across four decades on the bench, Donald also led nationally. She was the first African American woman to serve as president of the American Bar Foundation and as an officer of the American Bar Association, a past president of the National Association of Women Judges, and a board member of the American Judicature Society. She taught law at Harvard, Georgetown, and other top universities, and her international work has taken her to more than 20 countries. She also helped establish the University of Memphis School of Law’s Center for Excellence in Decision-Making.

Through it all, her love of teaching has remained constant. “Ideas invigorate me,” she said. “Whether I am teaching the concepts of justice to law students or mentoring rising attorneys, it is the confluence of brilliant new thoughts and young minds that motivates me. Our world is a classroom of ideas — a palace of possibilities.”

Reflecting on her student years, Donald admits she sometimes wished she had lived on campus rather than commuting to night classes. “As a commuter student, I did not make the universe of friends as I would have had I lived on campus,” she said. Yet the University remains close to her heart. “It provided me with a first-class, high-quality, and economically accessible education. By every metric, we are competitive, and the University is still the best ticket in the region.”

When asked what every Tiger should experience in Memphis, Donald points to the National Civil Rights Museum. “It demonstrates the possibilities. It covers where Memphis was, where it is now, and where it is going. These things only become reality because of people of goodwill and vision.”

To recent graduates, she offers this advice: “Show initiative, prepare with excellence, persevere and be inclusive. Build your network, listen to others, laugh when possible and never let ego triumph over empathy. Each day is a gift from God — the service that we render is our gift to God.”

For Donald, being a Memphis Tiger is a lifelong identity. “The University of Memphis is home,” she said. “It’s where my aspirations of becoming an attorney became reality through hard work and determination. Memphis gave me a chance to build my legacy as a judge, and it will no doubt be home to future impressive attorneys and judges who carry forward the mantle of justice.”

** This interview was originally published by the University of Memphis and is reprinted here with permission. Written by Grace John, Communications Coordinator, University of Memphis Advancement.*