Looking Back; Moving Forward
Career Transitions as a Woman of Color

By Hon. Risë Jones Pichon (Ret.)

Looking back on two career changes over my 40-plus-year career, it would seem the second should be easier than the first—easier in the sense that my background and experience should have stood on their own.

After all, I had built a striking resume, developed a wide variety of skills, and garnered glowing accolades. With all of the successes and advances by women of color in the legal field, society’s views on their abilities and competence have most certainly evolved.

Plus, we have learned from our own experiences and have taken to heart those valuable lessons. So, it would seem that each transition should be easier to navigate than the one preceding it.

But effecting change in deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs, and moving beyond the status quo to bring about meaningful long-lasting policies and practices, takes time. And I have learned that true change occurs at a much slower pace in the field of law. Past successes do not guarantee a painless transition to a new role within our profession.

I began my legal career working as an attorney in two county government agencies. After six years, I transitioned to the bench as a court commissioner, and then to the municipal court and the superior court. In each of these positions, there were very few, if any, other women of color. Following my retirement from the bench, I began working as a mediator and arbitrator with JAMS.

Women of color have come a long way, but not far enough. Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor is often quoted for...
To this day, women of color continue to be underrepresented in the legal profession and continue to face challenges to gain admission into large law firms and corporations.

There will be many hurt feelings from snubs, challenges to your authority, and disrespectful acts. Think about whether these slights warrant filing a formal complaint. Look for the hidden lessons and learn from them. Don’t lose sight of your goals, and remember your support system: your friends, family, and mentors.

The road to achieving equality is a long one, and for women of color, it will continue to be a challenging one. Just think how much more difficult it was for our mothers, grandmothers, and the trailblazing women who made our achievements possible. We must acknowledge, and be grateful to, the women of color who preceded us, and whose paths were so much more difficult, for they have given us the courage to dream and the inspiration to dare to accomplish our dreams.