



Seventh Judicial Circuit of Maryland

COURT HOUSE

UPPER MARLBORO, MARYLAND 20772

THE HONORABLE SHEILA R. TILLERSON ADAMS
CHIEF AND ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE

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CIRCUIT COURT FOR PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY AND THE
SEVENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT OF MARYLAND

June 15, 2020

Dear Members of the Bar Association:

Black lives matter!

If that statement is uncomfortable to hear or say, then ask yourself why. Black lives matter! History has shown that this truth has not been self-evident since the founding of our republic. Whether one believes that we have made great progress in reaching the ideals set forth in the preamble to the Constitution often depends upon their place in society. James Baldwin once remarked:

If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected-- those, precisely, who need the law's protection most! -- and listens to their testimony.

The disturbing incidents involving the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor and the response to them by communities around the world demonstrate that more must be done to ensure equal justice under the law for all of our citizens. These events are the latest in a pattern of similar incidents that have ripped open a festering wound in our nation. Although America was founded upon the principles of freedom and equality, it once considered Black people a fraction of a human being, and per Chief Justice Roger B. Taney of the Supreme Court of the United States, Blacks were not included in the Declaration of Independence phrase, " All men are created equal" and were so far inferior that they "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." These once legal and racist laws of the land have been difficult to root out of all our institutions, including our system of justice.

History has also shown that lawyers and courts have been catalysts for change, championing progress for Black people, women, and others in the fight for freedom and equality. Think Charles Hamilton Houston, the Honorable Thurgood Marshall and the Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg (the "Notorious RBG"), among many others. If the rule of law is to prevail, we must earnestly take up the fight to rid our system of any vestiges of racism and bias. To do so requires each of us to engage in honest self-reflection and unceasing examination to ensure that we are not being guided by any implicit biases.

How do we do this? We must challenge and correct our colleagues and each other whenever we witness a discriminatory act in our presence. We must proclaim that it is not acceptable in our society, even if the act or statement was said or done in jest. Not acceptable even if the actor was naive to its racist implication. I recall presiding over a criminal trial years ago being tried by one of our very talented and respected trial lawyers. Consistent with his reputation, he was doing a masterful job, but then during his argument, he walked over to his black client and described him as resembling “Buckwheat” before a predominately black jury. Stunned, I simply glanced at the jurors as I witnessed their previously attentive faces begin to contort with dismay and disgust. I doubt if they heard another word during that argument. Equally surprising, counsel had no idea he had said anything improper or that he had offended anyone.

After the trial, my bailiff and I took the time to explain the derogatory implications of the “Buckwheat” comment. The attorney was shocked. He even returned on a subsequent day and advised that when he mentioned it to friends, they also thought it was something funny. He wrote a sincere apology and truly regretted the incident but had no clue. But now he does.

Derogatory, racist remarks are made all the time, some are learned, some are habit, some are stereotypical, and some made are just because we are clueless as to the reality of a world or society beyond our own. We have got to do better, and it must start with us. Silence is not an option.

As judges, we pledged an oath to execute our duties diligently, faithfully, and without partiality or prejudice. We, therefore, accept the responsibility to ensure that all who appear before us are treated with dignity and respect. We accept the responsibility to treat ALL parties equally.

To the community we serve: We hear your testimony and promise to live up to our court’s motto to be *A Fair Forum for Justice*. We also challenge each of you to make this a fair and just society for all. Thank you!

Sincerely,



Sheila R. Tillerson Adams
Chief and Administrative Judge
Circuit Court for Prince George’s County
and the Seventh Judicial Circuit of Maryland