

Tanya Walton Pratt



Introduction

Tanya Walton Pratt (born 1959) is a United States district judge for the [Southern District of Indiana](#). She is only the fourth woman to serve in this position for the State of Indiana. Judge Pratt joins Judge Jane Magnus-Stinson (confirmed June 7, 2010) and Judge Sarah Evans Barker in the Southern District and Judge Theresa Lazar Springmann in the Northern District. In another historical note, Judge Pratt is the first [African American](#) to be appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Indiana and the first African-American federal judge in the State of Indiana.^[8]

Judge Barker, who became the State of Indiana's first female judge in 1984, warmly welcomes her new colleagues, "Their [Judge Pratt and Judge Magnus-Stinson] coming to the court is so special and new, but it's been a long time coming," said Judge Barker. "It matters so much that the bench is diverse, and in rapid order we've gone to being a majority on the court after many years of being a distinct minority." Judge Pratt adds, "You have to have those distinguished role models ... so you can see others work hard and do it, and know that you can, too." She completely agrees with Judge Magnus-Stinson who says one of the best rewards of the confirmation process has been to see the pride in their daughters' eyes. "Any little girl can do it."^[16]

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Personal life

Tanya Walton Pratt was born in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1959 and has been a member of St. Joan of Arc Catholic church since 1970. Her husband, Marcel A. Pratt, Jr., practices criminal law in Indianapolis. ^[1]

College and law school

While studying at Spelman College, a historically black liberal arts college for women located in Atlanta, Georgia, Judge Pratt joined Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. ^[1] Founded in 1913 at Howard University, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. is a predominantly African-American Greek sorority that engages in social service activities. It has more than 200,000 members in over 900 chapters located in the United States, England, Japan, Germany, the Virgin Islands, Bermuda, the Bahamas, and the Republic of Korea. ^[3] Judge Pratt completed her Bachelors of Arts degree in 1981. ^[1]

In 1984, Judge Pratt graduated from the Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1869, Howard Law School is the first law school dedicated to the education of African Americans in the United States. ^[2] After her first year at Howard, Judge Pratt was a summer intern at the Center Township Assessor's Office in Indianapolis. The following summer and during her third year, she clerked for the Neighborhood Legal Service Program, a federally funded program that provides legal services to low-income residents of the District of Columbia. ^[1]

Early legal career

Private practice

Upon being admitted to the bars of Indiana and the U.S. District Courts for both the Northern and Southern District of Indiana in 1984, Judge Pratt practiced law with her father, Charles A. Walton (now deceased), husband Marcel A. Pratt, Jr., and brother Charles A. Walton, Jr. at their firm, Moss & Walton. As an associate attorney, Judge Pratt's law practice generally included criminal law, family law, personal injury, bankruptcy, wills and probate, Social Security, and civil rights discrimination. Furthermore, from 1986 to 1991, Judge Pratt worked part-time as a Deputy Public Defender. In 1992, she joined Walton & Pratt as an attorney. In all, from 1984 to 1996, Judge Pratt tried 100 cases to verdict or judgment, approximately sixty percent as sole counsel. ^[1]

Judge Pratt began her judicial career in 1993 when Marion Superior Court Judge Paula Lopossa hired her as a Master Commissioner (pro tempore judge), a part-time position. For the remaining three years of her private practice, Judge Pratt did not defend criminal cases, rather concentrating

on family law, probate law, and bankruptcy until she was elected a judge of the Marion Superior Court in 1996. ^[1]

Notable cases

In the Matter of Taylor Children (Marion Superior Court, Juvenile Division, Case No. 49D09-9112-JC-63840) (1991).

In this case, the Indiana Department of Child Services filed a petition alleging children-in-need of services, based in part upon allegations that the working parents were too busy to take care of the three children. Judge Pratt represented the parents of the Taylor children and succeeded in obtaining a dismissal of the petition. The proceedings included substantial pre-trial motions and discovery hearings. ^[1]

Lloyd v. Columbus Lloyd (Marion County Circuit Court, Case No. 49C01-9009-DR-3459) (1990).

In *Lloyd v. Columbus Lloyd*, after the wife had filed a Petition for Dissolution of Marriage and the parties had entered into a property settlement agreement, the husband, Judge Pratt's client, won the lottery. His wife sought to set aside the property settlement agreement. Following extensive discovery and substantial pre-trial motions, the husband prevailed on summary judgment. ^[1]

Marion Superior Court judge: Criminal Division 1

Nomination

First elected judge of the Marion Superior Court, a state trial court, in 1996, Judge Pratt was subsequently re-elected in November 2002 and 2008. She began work as a full-time judge on January 1, 1997. ^[1]

Judgeship

During her tenure in Criminal Court One, major felony division, Judge Pratt was a member of the Judicial Administration Committee of the Indiana Judicial Conference and the Indiana Supreme Court Judicial Administration Committee. She also served as chair of the Criminal Term Division of the Marion Superior Court from 1998 to 2000 and then as co-chair of the Marion Superior Court Magistrate & Commissioner Taskforce from 2004 to 2008. From 2006 to 2010, Judge Pratt was an Associate Presiding Judge for the Executive Committee of the Marion Superior Court. ^[1]

During her twelve years in the major felony criminal court, Judge Pratt presided over 20 to 35 jury trials annually and worked with suspects accused of armed robberies, rapes, and murders. ^[7] Yet, throughout her time in the criminal court, Judge Pratt remained optimistic about the future. In an interview with WTHR-TV Channel 13 Eyewitness News, she says the majority of inmates in her court wanted to change: "A lot of people make mistakes." After listing catalysts for crime (mental illness, substance abuse, lack of education, and poverty), Judge Pratt stresses that some of these factors lead to a disproportionate number of minorities in prison. "I sincerely believe

that race is not a predictor of crime, but issues such as poverty, a disproportionate number of minorities are below the poverty level,” she says. ^[10]

Judge Pratt has always been focused on helping kids in the criminal court system. From 2005 to 2006, she served as chair of the Marion Superior Court Juvenile Justice Planning Committee. Then, from 2007 to 2010, as supervising judge of the Marion County Juvenile Detention Center (JDC), Judge Pratt worked with the Annie Casey Foundation and JDAI (Juvenile Detention Alternatives to Incarceration) to reform the JDC. Together, they reduced overcrowding and saved money while greatly improving conditions, all without jeopardizing public safety or court appearance rates. ^[1]

From 2003 to 2004, Judge Pratt was Chief Justice Randall Shepard’s appointee to the Indiana Sentencing Policy Study Commission. Making it possible for former-criminals to gain a new foothold on life is a top priority for Judge Pratt. Quite often, when prisoners re-enter society, their criminal records make finding employment and housing very difficult and thus increase the motivation for committing additional criminal acts. Judge Pratt would like to see more rehabilitation, re-entry, and educational programs for prisoners. “I know people don’t want to spend their tax dollars educating criminals who are in prison, but when you think about it, if you don’t want them to continue and to be repeat offenders, we’ve got to give them something when they get out.” They need hope. ^[10]

As a Marion Superior Court judge, Tanya Pratt enjoyed great rapport with the defendants in her courtroom, gaining the reputation as a tough but respectful judge. In the same interview with WTHR-TV Channel 13 Eyewitness News, she says, “My husband teases me all the time and says that they way I talk to my defendants, I will give somebody ten years and they’ll say, ‘Thank you, Judge Pratt.’” She expresses her driving motivation, “You’ve got to have faith that mankind can be turned around. These are all human beings that we deal with in the court system, so you can’t give up.” ^[10]

Notable rulings

Habibzadah v. State 904 N.E.2d 367 (Ind. Ct. App. 2009)

Habibzadah v. State was a highly publicized case that raised questions about Indiana’s criminal justice system’s efforts in dealing with defendants who may never be competent to stand trial. In *Habibzadah v. State*, the defendant Habibzadah sought review of a decision denying his motion to dismiss criminal charges of attempted murder and felony aggravated battery for the November 2005 stabbing of his wife in the chest and head. During the incident, the defendant also stabbed himself in the stomach and sliced his neck, which rendered him essentially deaf and suffering from cognitive impairment. In 2007, the defendant was committed to the Indiana Department of Mental Health because of a determination that he was incompetent to stand trial. Civil commitment proceeding were initiated in 2008 because the defendant had not yet attained competency. Judge Pratt determined that she did not have the authority to dismiss the charges and that it would be premature to dismiss the case because of the possibility that the defendant could become competent to stand trial. The appellate court unanimously agreed that Judge Pratt properly denied the defendant’s motion to dismiss criminal charges because no determination had been made that the defendant would never be restored to competency. ^[1]

Hannoy v. State 789 N.E.2d 977 (Ind. Ct. App. 2003), rehearing granted 793 N.E.2d 1109 (Ind. Ct. App. 2003), transfer denied 804 N.E.2d 753 (Ind. 2003)

Hannoy v. State ended a long standing policy of the Indianapolis Police Department. The defendant Hannoy appealed his conviction on two counts of operating a motor vehicle with a blood alcohol content of .10 percent or greater and causing death by challenging the admissibility of blood alcohol evidence gathered in two different tests. The first sample was ordered by police and taken without the defendant's consent while the second was performed for diagnostic purposes after the defendant's hospital admission. The appellate court reversed the conviction and remanded the matter for re-trial, concluding that the relevant statute did not authorize police to take the first blood sample without obtaining a driver's consent. The second sample, which the defendant had consented to, was deemed admissible for the second trial. ^[1]

Marion Superior Court judge: Probate Division 8

Nomination

Due to seniority, Judge Pratt transferred to the Probate Division of the Marion Superior Court and began duties on January 1, 2009. ^[1]

Judgeship

As a probate judge, Judge Pratt presided over adoptions, adult and child guardianships, wills, trusts and estate matters. She was a member of the Probate Committee of the Indiana Judicial Conference from 2009 until her appointment as a federal district judge in 2010. ^[1]

As a judge in both the Criminal and Probate Courts, Judge Pratt presided over 2,000 cases. During her hearing before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on February 11, 2010, Judge Pratt shared her experience as a judge: "I believe that main thing that I learned from my thirteen years as a trial judge is the fact that we do make very difficult decisions that have a huge impact not only on our own litigants but also the entire community. I believe that it is important to prepare in advance for your cases, to listen carefully and clearly to the argument of counsel, to research before you make decisions, to make sure that your decisions follow precedent and respect the doctrine of stare decisis." ^[12]

Federal district judge

Nomination and confirmation

In March 2009, Judge Pratt expressed her interest in the district court to [Senator Evan Bayh](#). In early May 2009, Judge Pratt met with Senator Bayh and his staff. The White House Counsel's Office and the Department of Justice contacted Judge Pratt in August 2009. Following a series of interviews with officials and attorneys from the [Department of Justice](#) and the Office of [White House Counsel](#) in November 2009, President Obama nominated her to the United States Senate

on January 20, 2010. ^[1] Pratt received a substantial majority rating of “Well Qualified” and a minority rating of “Qualified” from the [American Bar Association](#). ^[4]

Judge Pratt was one of five candidates nationwide to be nominated to the U.S. District Court on January 20th. “I am honored to nominate these five distinguished candidates to the United States District Court bench,” said President Obama. “They represent some of the best in American jurisprudence and they will serve the American people with integrity. I am grateful for their commitment to public service and look forward to their appointment to the federal bench.” ^[6]

Both U.S. Senators from Indiana, Richard Lugar and Evan Bayh, supported her nomination. “Today, we take a historic step in creating a more diverse federal judiciary in our state.” Bayh said, announcing his nomination of Tanya Walton Pratt and Jane Magnus-Stinson for the Southern District of Indiana and Jon DeGuilio for the Northern District of Indiana. “These highly qualified individuals have impeccable records and rich backgrounds that will help move us closer to our goal of realizing equal justice under law.” Bayh added, “Mr. DeGuilio, Judge Magnus-Stinson and Judge Pratt have each shown themselves to be deserving of the public trust. They have demonstrated the highest ethical standards and a firm commitment to applying our country’s laws fairly and faithfully. They know their job is to interpret our laws, not write them.” ^[7]

Judge Pratt underwent a hearing before the [United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary](#) on February 11, 2010, which voted to forward her nomination to the full Senate on March 4, 2010. ^[4] The Senate unanimously confirmed Judge Pratt as a Federal Judge for the Southern District of Indiana in a voice vote (95-0) on June 15, 2010, and President Obama signed her commission the same day. Judge Pratt filled the vacancy created by the elevation of Judge [David F. Hamilton](#) to the [United States Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals](#). She is the first [African American](#) to be appointed to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Indiana and the first African-American federal judge in the State of Indiana. ^[8]

Judge Pratt watched the vote on C-SPAN 2 with her husband, Marcel, and her staff from the Probate Court in the Indianapolis City-County Building. “It was great, just an awesome experience to see your name flash across the screen on C-SPAN and hear these senators who we think so highly of to actually say ‘ay,’ give me an affirmative nod,” said Judge Pratt during an interview with *Afternoons with Amos*, the popular WTLC-AM radio talk show in Indianapolis. “Everyone in my office...cheered and hugged. It was just a very awesome moment. I’m really appreciative of everyone who supported me throughout the process.” ^[13] “This (process) has been a test of patience, but I’m so very happy and honored.” ^[14]

Senator Bayh congratulated Judge Pratt on her confirmation. “I...can say with confidence that she is an outstanding Hoosier and the embodiment of good judicial temperament, intellect and even-handedness,” Bayh said. “She is an exceptional jurist who has proven her dedication to public service and the rule of law.” He added, “I hope her success will inspire Hoosier children of all backgrounds to pursue their dreams by working hard and playing by the rules.” ^[15]

On June 25, 2010, Judge Pratt took the oath to become a United States District Judge. Chief Judge Richard L. Young administered the oath at the Birch Bayh Federal Building and United

States Courthouse in Indianapolis. Judge Pratt's family, friends, and staff filled the courtroom to show their support. ^[8]

Judge Pratt reflected upon her momentous confirmation on *Afternoons with Amos*. "I feel the history and I respect the historical significance of being the first African-American federal judge in the State of Indiana," she said. "I have to give a lot of credit to Senator Bayh. There are many judges and lawyers in the Southern District of Indiana who are qualified for the position. I credit Senator Bayh for looking outside that typical and traditional group of candidates because...I am a very ordinary person. I did not grow up within that circle of insiders who have a professional or a personal relationship with senators or governors. Senator Bayh made that extra effort to be inclusive and to take a serious look at my qualifications when they were brought to his attention." ^[13]

Other activities and associations

Bar associations

Judge Pratt is active in numerous bar associations including the American Bar Association (since 2009), the Lawyers Club of Indianapolis (since 2009), the Indianapolis Bar Foundation (since 1999), the Indianapolis American Inn of Court (master since 1999), and the Judicial Counsel for the National Bar Association (since 1997). ^[1]

Judge Pratt has also led a multitude of groups throughout her legal career. A member of the Indiana State Bar Association (ISBA) since 1999, Judge Pratt has served as a delegate (from 2007 to present) and secretary (2009 to present). In 2009, Judge Pratt was co-chair, with former Lake Circuit Judge Lorenzo Arredondo, of the ISBA's "Summit on Racial Disparities in the Juvenile System." The conference was a follow-up to a study by the Commission on Disproportionality in Youth Services, which was established by the Indiana General Assembly in 2007. The focus of this summit was to bring together local and national politicians, lawyers, judges, social workers, educators, law enforcement officers, and even parents to learn about what has worked for other communities to reduce disproportionate minority confinement (DMC) and share ideas of how similar programs could be implemented in Indiana. ^[9]

Judge Pratt has also led the Indianapolis Bar Association (IBA) as Vice-President (2005 to 2006) and served on its Board of Managers (1998 to 2000) and Women Lawyers Division Steering Committee (2000 Convention). She has been a life member of the Marion County Bar Association since 1997, serving on its Board of Directors (2000 to 2009) and acting as Board Chair (2005-2008). ^[1]

Volunteer

Known for her generosity and altruism, Judge Pratt is an ardent volunteer. While in private practice, she served on the Marion County Bar Association's Pro Bono panel and spent more than 300 hours each year on pro-bono work, mostly in the area of family law, land-lord tenant and other small claims issues. ^[1] As a full-time judge, Judge Pratt served as a community

volunteer and sentenced those on probation to join her. “You would not believe the impact it will have on a criminal defendant to see their judge with them doing community service work,” she says. ^[10]

Judge Pratt also works to create opportunities for disadvantaged youth. As a member of the Indiana CLEO (Conference on Legal Education Opportunity) Advisory Board since 2007, she works on recruitment efforts. Indiana CLEO, a project of the Indiana Supreme Court, was created in 1997 at the urging of Chief Justice Randall T. Shepard. The program helps college graduates from minority, low-income, and disadvantaged backgrounds go to and excel at any of Indiana’s four law schools. It includes a summer mentoring and educational program as well as financial aid. Chief Justice Shepard explains, “Our ultimate goal is to have law school classes as diverse as any Hoosier neighborhood.” ^[5]

In addition, Judge Pratt has served as an advisory panel member of the *Indiana Lawyer*, a publisher of print and online legal news important to Indiana attorneys, since 2007. She also has been a trustee and board member of Cathedral High School (since 2005) and the Watson-McCord Park Neighborhood Association (from 2005 to 2008). ^[1]

African-American heritage

Interviewed at least twice by Amos C. Brown on *Afternoons with Amos*, the most listened to talk show among African Americans in Indianapolis, Judge Pratt recognizes the historical significance of her recent confirmation, “I’m very proud of my background. I think I came from a very non-traditional federal judge route. I’m a product of historically black colleges and universities [Spelman College and Howard University]...I think that I can provide an example that, as African Americans, we can be anything we want to be, you can do whatever you want to do. And we can get a wonderful, excellent education at the historically black colleges and universities.” ^{[11][17]}

Needless to say, Judge Pratt’s African-American heritage is very near and dear to her heart. She has been a life member of the NAACP since 1977. Judge Pratt has also worked since 2000 as the advisory board member for the Indianapolis affiliate of the United Negro College Fund, Inc. In addition, she is very involved with the Indiana Dr. Martin Luther King Holiday Commission, serving as chair (from 2001 to 2008) and as an active member today. ^[1]

Awards and honors

Judge Pratt has been recognized not only for her impressive community work but also for her professional success. In 2007, she was given the key to the City of Muncie, Indiana. Then, in 2002, she not only graduated from the Indiana Graduate Program for Judges but also was honored as the “Outstanding Judge of the Year” Award by the Indiana Coalition Against Sexual Assault. ^[1]

Several faith communities have also recognized Judge Pratt’s altruism and success. She received the Career Achievement Award from the Indianapolis Archdiocese and Cathedral High School Alumni Association in 2006 and 2007 respectively. In addition, she was awarded the Pioneers in

Faith and Family Award from the Ministerial Alliances of Indianapolis in 2002 and the Community Leadership Award from the Great Harvest Church of God in Christ in 2001. ^[1]

Published Writings

Articles

- Press Release: Governor Appoints Judge Chair of the Indiana Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday commission, March 13, 2001.

Policy statements

- The Role of Lawyers and the Rule of Law, practice skill summit of the Indiana Continuing Legal Education Forum, January 2007 & January 2008

“See also” for Wikipedia

See also

- [United States District Court for the Southern District of Indiana](#)

External links

- [Tanya Walton Pratt](#) at the *Biographical Directory of Federal Judges*, a [public domain](#) publication of the [Federal Judicial Center](#).
- [Tanya Walton Pratt on Judgepedia](#)
- [List of Southern District of Indiana judges](#)
- Pratt’s [Public Questionnaire](#)
- Pratt’s [Questions for the Record](#)
- [Indiana CLEO](#)

References

¹ [US Senate Committee on the Judiciary: Questionnaire for Judicial Nominees](#). 19 Jan. 2010

² [United States Cong. House. *Recognizing and honoring Howard University School of Law's 140-year legacy of social justice*. Carolyn C. Kilpatrick, 111 Cong., 1 sess. HR Res. 684.](#)
(Retrieved 27 June 2010)

³ [“Mission Statement.” Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.](#) (Retrieved 29 June 2010)

⁴ [Judicial Nomination Materials: 111th Congress](#)

⁵ [Indiana CLEO](#)

⁶ [White House Press Release “President Obama Nominates Five to Serve on the United States District Court Bench.”](#) 20 Jan. 2010

⁷ [Bayh Press Release *Senator Bayh Makes Historic Judicial Announcements*](#), 18 Jan. 2010

⁸ *Southern District of Indiana Press Release* [The Hon. Tanya Walton Pratt sworn in as District Judge](#), 25 June 2010.

⁹ [Teaming up for change](#), 2 Sept. 2009.

¹⁰ Interview with WTHR-TV Channel 13 Eyewitness News [Criminal court judge sets example](#), Feb. 2007.

¹¹ Prod. Amos Brown. [“Federal Judge Nominee Tanya Walton Pratt Talks to AWA.”](#) *Afternoons with Amos*. Radio One, 2009. Radio Broadcast. Dir. WTLC-AM. 21 Jan. 2010.

¹² Prod. Amos Brown. [“Judge Tanya Walton-Pratt’s Senate Judiciary Committee Testimony.”](#) *Afternoons with Amos*. Radio One, 2010. Radio Broadcast. Dir. WTLC-AM. 12 Feb. 2010.

¹⁴ [Judge Pratt makes history in move to federal bench](#), 15 June 2010.

¹⁵ *Bayh Press Release* [Tanya Walton Pratt Confirmed as U.S. District Judge for the Southern District of Indiana](#), 15 June 2010.

¹⁶ [2 new judges on federal court make history](#), 23 June 2010.

¹⁷ [Amos C. Brown](#), 5 Feb. 2009

Legal offices	
Preceded by Judge David F. Hamilton	United States District Judge for the Southern District of Indiana 2010-present
Preceded by	Judge of the Marion Superior Court, Probate Division 2009-2010
Preceded by	Judge of the Marion Superior Court, Criminal Division 1997-2008

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