

## **Deborah Watson-Stokes**

Good morning Senator Muth, Representative Bizzarro, Representative Bullock, Senator Williams, Representative Lee, and Senator Street. Thank you for allowing me to testify on my experiences of racial and gender bias in the court system. My name is Deborah Watson-Stokes and I've been a prosecutor for 30 years. I am the supervisor of the Municipal Court Unit of the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office. Prior to my supervisor role, I spent 17 years of my career in the Homicide Unit... but today I want to talk to you as myself, an African American woman, wife, mother, and a long time resident of West Philadelphia.

In 1990, the words micro-aggression, intersectionality, and supremacy culture were rarely used. It was also rare to see black female prosecutors and judges in courtrooms. For 13 of my 17 years in homicide, I was the only black female. As a younger DA, I was often asked whether I was the public defender or the defendant when I arrived to court. It truly felt like this system had no place for me. I would often hear the victim's family members question the level of my blackness and whisper to themselves, "Is she real?, Is she real enough?" During the course of my career, I've watched the astonished faces of veneer people and the delight on African American faces when they discovered that I was the prosecutor. They would almost breathe a sigh of relief because they understood that if they couldn't get a fair shake from me, they couldn't get a fair shake from anyone.

Furthermore, our citizens expect our court systems to not only be fair to victims of crimes and defendants, but also to judges and court staff alike. Representation matters and it is critical that the bench reflect the diverse population that they serve. However, according to the Center for Urban and Racial Equity, female judges of color are experiencing specific harm within

FJD's organizational culture and structure and perceive less organizational commitment to equity than other groups.”<sup>1</sup> I have witnessed false allegations against African American judges, threats to their personal safety, and attempts to discipline them because of their judicial temperament and demeanor, where others were allowed to remain in their positions unchecked. Also, I've overheard microaggressions about their natural hair, physical appearance, and intelligence. I'd like to see an environment that not only encourages judges and court staff to report incidences of racial and gender discrimination, but also, makes a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Urban & Racial Equity, First Judicial District of Pennsylvania Equity Organizational Assessment Report (2019).