



Court Clerk Vivian Jenkins swears in Michele D. Hotten, the first black woman to become a Prince George's Circuit Court judge. With Hotten are her daughter and husband.

BY JOEL RICHARDSON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Case Closed: Judge Sticks To Her Plan

Early Decision Leads to a First

By Philip P. Pan
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Michele D. Hotten was sitting in front of a television set in her family's apartment in Northeast Washington when she made up her mind. She was in grade school, not yet 10 years old, but after watching Perry Mason work his magic in the courtroom on the old black-and-white *Zenith*, she knew she had seen her future. This little girl would practice law.

At the time, it seemed to some a preposterous idea—not only because she was a girl but also because she was black. "I encountered many white individuals who told me that that was not a suitable goal for an African American," Hotten said.

But with the support of a mother who always seemed to be working and an uncle who taught her never to give up, Hotten chased her made-by-TV dream. Last week, after a career that included stints as a prosecutor and in private practice, and after a year and a half as a judge on the District Court, Hotten, at 41, became the first African American woman to sit on the Prince George's Circuit Court.

"I see it as a tremendous landmark," said Circuit Court Judge William B. Missouri, the county's chief administrative judge. "For some reason, the talents of African American women have

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Says Judge Hotten of her appointment: "It shows that we've made some progress. We still have a long way to go."

Unwavering Choice Leads to a First

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been slow to be recognized in this region and in this profession."

"It was past time for African American women to be on the Circuit Court," he said.

In a county that has seen its black population triple in less than two decades and that last year elected its first African American executive, Hotten's appointment by Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D) is another sign of politics catching up with the times.

Before this November's appointments of Hotten and District Court Judge Sherrie L. Krauser to Maryland's 7th Judicial Circuit, there were only two women on the county's bench of 19 judges.

Hotten is well aware of the historic nature of her appointment. "I'm very humbled, very humbled by the experience," she said. "I probably should be nervous, but I'm not. I'm just delighted to be chosen as the first."

"It shows that we've made some progress. We still have a long way to go," she said.

Hotten grew up in the District, the older of two daughters in a single-parent family. Her father left when she was young, and she never got to know him. Her mother worked various clerical jobs, sometimes two or three at a time.

Hotten said it was difficult growing up in a single-parent home. "Parents should be your first role models. They show you what it means to be an adult; they teach you right and wrong. When you lack one of these elements, when you have one parent, then it's just work to survive," she said.

"There was a tremendous burden on my mother. It's a burden that's faced by many African American women," she said. "She wasn't around that much at times, but the aura of her presence was there."

Hotten attended public school until after the sixth grade, when she enrolled in Catholic schools. As a teenager, Hotten spent summers as a camp counselor for the D.C. Department of Recreation.

Hotten said her family always emphasized the importance of education, and they instilled in her a love of reading.

"There was no question that you excelled academically. There was no excuse for not doing so. From the start, not going to college was out of the question," she said.

One of her role models was an uncle, Oscar J. Lane, who worked as a teacher in the D.C. schools. He wanted to be a lawyer, but his studies were interrupted when he was drafted into World War II. He passed his dream, and a motto—"I can, I must, I will"—on to his niece.

"He drilled that into me. He would never let me say I can't," she said. "He was always doing things to help people. He taught me that was our responsibility as human beings."

Lane died last year, but he was present last June when Hotten was sworn in to the District Court. Hotten still keeps some of her uncle's law books in her chambers.

There are other items in Hotten's chambers that she points out. One is a courtroom artist's sketch of Hotten presiding over a bond review hearing for Jeffrey C. Gilbert, the Lanham man who alleges he was beaten by county police officers this past spring. There also is a pair of paintings—one depicting a black female attorney arguing before a black female judge, the other showing a black male attorney before a black male judge.

Race and gender have been important issues for Hotten, not always by choice.

When Hotten enrolled in the University of South Florida's New College, for example, she intended to major in English. But then she noticed there were no African American authors on the reading lists.

"I asked the head of the English Department about it, and I was told that it was not a significant omission," she recalled. "That was a rude awakening. I was very angry."

"I was raised by a family that taught me to be proud of my heritage," said Hotten, who ended up majoring in political science and writing her thesis on W.E.B. DuBois.

All through her life, Hotten said, being a black woman has meant being underestimated. She said she always was advancing against an undercurrent of bias.

"In private practice, I would show up at meetings, and

I was always asked if I was the court reporter. At trial, people would ask me when the real attorney would arrive," she said.

Just a few weeks ago, she said, someone in the courtroom assumed she was a secretary and not a judge.

"I take it in stride and attempt to educate the ignorant," Hotten said. "And things are slowly getting better. I'm seeing more and more talented individuals make it. The struggles that I had to go through are a little different than the struggles of this generation."

After college, Hotten returned to Washington and attended law school at Howard University. "Howard was my first opportunity to be among a group of professionals of my own race who were achievement-oriented," she said. "It was great."

She said her favorite professor was a man named Alex Williams. In 1986, Prince George's County voted Williams in as the county's first black state's attorney. And Hotten—who had been hired by Williams's predecessor—would work for Williams.

Six years out of law school, Hotten got her first chance to argue in a courtroom like her hero Perry Mason. "It was absolutely wonderful," she said. "There's no high like trying a case."

After four years as a prosecutor, Hotten was in private practice from 1989 to 1994. Recently while still in private practice, she simultaneously served in part-time positions for Prince George's as deputy people's zoning counsel, special counsel to the Board of Education, special counsel to the Human Relations Commission, circuit court examiner and pre-law adviser at the University of Maryland.

"She was very, very busy," said Elizabeth Hewlett, chairman of the Prince George's board of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and an old friend of Hotten's. "That would have driven most of us Looney Tunes."

"She is very dedicated, and she pursues everything with vigor. Nobody takes more notes than Michele. She has a notebook for everything," Hewlett said. She said Hotten always has a pad of yellow Post-Its handy and is forever jotting down notes to herself. "They're all over her office, all over her home."

In 1985, Hotten got married. Her husband, Jerome, is a manager for the U.S. Postal Service. He spends more time with their 7-year-old daughter, Danielle, than she can.

"He's a wonderful Mr. Mom, always pitching in if I have to go to meetings," Hotten said. "He's been very supportive. From day one, he always told me you can do it, if that's what you want to do."

It wasn't long before Hotten started making a name for herself in the legal community. It was a gradual process, Hewlett said, but Hotten eventually built a reputation for good work.

In 1994, she was elected president of the J. Franklyn Bourne Bar Association, a legal society of black lawyers. She also was tapped for a judgeship on the District Court.

The job, as District Court Judge Sheila Tillerson-Adams said at Hotten's investiture Friday, "fit her like a glove."

District Court Judge Frank Kratovil, the administrative judge, described Hotten as an "experienced, mature and hard working" jurist who was a pleasure to work with.

"I think if you ask the clerical staff and the bailiffs, you'd find she was very well liked. She has a bubbly personality. She's very friendly and outgoing," he said.

Hotten said the transition from lawyer to judge was an easy one, and an exciting one. "You have a greater impact on people's lives. You make decisions that affect people's directions," she said. "To these people, it's probably the most important thing going on in their lives."

She said that important that circuit court will mean the stakes will be higher. Hotten said she is going into the job with an open mind, although she hopes to make a difference on domestic violence cases.

Ask her what her weakness is, and Hotten will tell you she works too hard. "I find it hard to relax because there are always things that have to be done," she said.

When she does take a break, it might be to catch the occasional Perry Mason television movie. More often, she said, it's reading John Grisham or Nancy Taylor Rosenberg. "I love those legal thrillers," she said.