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Young, Gifted, and Black: Why It Matters

*Hon. Romonda D. Belcher**

I was born the second child of a lower, middle-class Black family. I emphasize “Black” because that is the first thing you notice when you see me. My Blackness is my birthright—something that is immutable and incapable of being disguised. It has evolved with knowledge and life experiences. Being Black does not define me or limit what I can accomplish. Being Black is, however, defined by my experiences. Being Black does not make me different because I am Black. I still need air to breathe; feel pain when I hurt; desire to be loved, happy, and healthy and want the same for my family and friends; have the same basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and safety as anyone else; and deserve the same opportunities as anyone else in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.

Somehow, at a time with so much division, we must find commonality even in disagreement. We must make ourselves uncomfortable in talking about how we arrived here before we can begin to move forward. We must be vulnerable and engaged in honest, open, yet difficult dialogue. If we all lived by the golden rule of treating others the way we want to be treated, perhaps the many disparities, racial inequities, and social injustices would not exist.

* Romonda D. Belcher was appointed as a District Associate Judge on August 20, 2010, becoming the first African American female judge in the State of Iowa. Born in Plymouth, North Carolina, she earned her Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honors from Howard University in 1990, and her Juris Doctorate Degree from Drake University Law School in 1995. Prior to her appointment to the bench, she served as an Assistant Polk County Attorney for 15 years prosecuting juvenile, criminal, and civil matters.

Judge Belcher has presided over civil and criminal matters and currently presides over juvenile dependency and delinquency cases and Polk County’s therapeutic, peer-based Family Treatment Court. She provides judicial training on trauma and being trauma-informed. She serves on several councils and committees to improve Iowa’s juvenile and criminal justice systems.

Judge Belcher has received numerous honors and recognitions for her commitment to service to the legal profession and her community. Most recently, she was recognized as a 2020 Woman of Influence by the *Des Moines Business Record*. Her trailblazing accomplishments have been recognized on the floor of the 116th United States Congress.

Judge Belcher is an adjunct professor at Drake University Law School. In her spare time, she serves as a mentor and is an avid dramatist.

Growing up in the South—in a small town with a population of less than 4,000—I do not recall lacking anything. Despite some dysfunction, I grew up in a loving and supportive environment. My mother taught me many valuable lessons—the greatest of which were the importance of my faith, the importance of pursuing higher education, and the importance of treating others the way I would want to be treated. She wanted me to be well-rounded and enjoy opportunities that were not afforded to her. She enrolled me in organ lessons, encouraged involvement in the school marching band and theatre, and signed me up to be a governor's page. At that time, I did not realize that meant I would have to live with a white host family two hours away. She even made sure I was involved with the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). I was a quiet and reserved child. My introverted nature allowed me to focus on my academics, and I excelled. My father would say that I would be the lawyer in the family. I am happy he lived to see that come to fruition, but witnessing the reality of my dream would be deferred five years too late.

At school, I was often the only, or one of a few, Black students in the advancement placement classes. Most times, I was the only Black child at birthday celebrations. While I was accepted by my peers, I noticed how others were treated differently because of their race, socio-economic status, lack of education, or the neighborhoods in which they lived. My childhood experiences inspired me to want to make a difference. Somehow, without an example of a legal role model, I believed judges were in a position to make a difference and to ensure people were treated fairly. From that moment, I only ever wanted to be a judge. I did not know the path of becoming a judge, nor, at that young age, did I know I would have to attend law school.

I was remarkably familiar with matriculating in an environment where others did not look like me. I grew to know who I was as my mother's daughter, but I still had a lot to learn about who I was as a Black female. For that reason, I chose to attend a Historically Black University. Today, I credit my experience at Howard University for aiding in my development of coming into my own. I learned more about the Black race and my history in those four years than I had ever learned during years of formal education. Of course, I had heard about Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Justice Thurgood Marshall. At Howard University, I learned so much more about my history, the Black Diaspora, James Baldwin, Mary McLeod Bethune, Charles Drew, Garrett Morgan, Frederick Douglas, and so many others. I was surrounded by others who looked like me, who were young, gifted, and Black. Others who had similar goals, dreams, and aspirations. Others who came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds but, for the first time, were on a leveled playing field. I was walking in the footprints of others who had achieved greatness. My experience at Howard University gave me the confidence I needed to believe in myself beyond being my mother's daughter with big dreams of making a difference.

I chose to attend Drake University Law School because I knew the world I lived in would not look like the campus at Howard University. Howard prepared me to attend Drake Law School and make Des Moines, Iowa my home for the past 29 years. My faith and the valuable lessons learned from my mother, along with my legal education and experiences at Drake and Howard University, gave me the audacity to believe I could accomplish my childhood dream of becoming a judge. When I first arrived in Iowa, I did not know the history of Gertrude Rush—the first Black female licensed to practice law in Iowa and a co-founder of the National Bar Association in 1925—at a time when Blacks were denied membership in the American Bar Association because of their race. Neither did I know that there were no Black female judges in the State of Iowa. I learned of Iowa’s rich civil rights history established in: *In re Ralph*,¹ where the Iowa Supreme Court in 1839 ruled that a former slave named Ralph would be free; *Clark v. Board of Directors*,² in which the Iowa Supreme Court held that school districts may not segregate students on the basis of race in 1868; and *State v. Katz*³ in 1949, where the Iowa Supreme Court upheld civil rights law that prohibited discrimination in public accommodation.

I was privileged to sit at the feet of a pioneer, the late Willie Stevenson Glanton, who was a woman of many firsts—and the first Black woman to be elected to the Iowa State Legislature. Not only was she a mentor, but we shared a bond that grew into a beautiful friendship spanning over 20 years. She epitomized grace, strength, and selflessness. Her example, Iowa’s rich and diverse history, and the possibility of opportunity stoked my belief in my dream to become a reality. As a child, I did not set out to make history or to be a trailblazer, but only to make a difference.

In what I refer to as my meantime, I embraced ways of making a difference as an assistant county attorney by ensuring individuals were treated fairly. Having taken many cases to trial, I earned a reputation of being fair, but firm. I believed I was ready to achieve my dream and started applying to become a judge within six years of graduating from law school. Over the years, I was told I was too young and that I did not have enough trial experience. After obtaining criminal trial experience, I was told that I did not have enough civil experience. Fortunately, I was able to move throughout the prosecutor’s office to obtain all the experience I “needed.” I worked as a prosecutor for 15 years before actualizing my dream. It is hard to become something that has never been done, seen, nor experienced.

As a member of the judiciary, I must abide by judicial ethics and standards in upholding the law. I took an oath to, without fear, favor, affection or hope of reward, administer justice equally to the rich and to the poor. In my

¹ See generally *In re Ralph*, 1 Morris 1 (Iowa 1839).

² See generally *Clark v. Board of Dirs.*, 24 Iowa 266 (Iowa 1868).

³ See generally *State v. Katz*, 40 N.W.2d 41 (Iowa 1949).

judicial capacity, I must remain neutral and impartial—even in this moment and time with so much division in our communities. I cannot be driven by my personal views, political pressure, or public opinion, but only upholding the rule of law.

Currently assigned to the juvenile docket, I preside over juvenile delinquency and dependency matters. Delinquency matters are those involving youth under the age of 18 who violate the law or commit delinquent acts. Dependency matters involve parents who are unable to safely care for their children. Every day, I have an opportunity to interact with individuals who appear before me. These are individuals who suffer from significant childhood and adult trauma including substance use, mental health, domestic violence, poverty, and the lack of education. Even if my decisions are not favorable, I endeavor to make a difference and ensure those entering my courtroom are treated with respect, shown compassion, treated fairly, and are given an opportunity to be heard.

I am also the presiding judge of Polk County's Family Treatment Court/Recovery Court. It is a weekly peer-based, therapeutic court designed to assist parents with services toward obtaining sobriety, maintaining a lifestyle of recovery, achieving self-sufficiency, and being reunified with their children. Presiding over a specialty court, I have received significant training on trauma. I now provide training for my colleagues, juvenile court officers, judicial law clerks, and other professionals. Having some understanding of the trauma experienced by those that I see, it is important that I am trauma-informed to avoid revictimization. My additional trauma training and life experiences allow me to be impactful and make a difference in the lives of those appearing before me.

My presence matters because I bring a perspective that may not be shared by my colleagues—a perspective that is enriched by my life experiences. Those life experiences add insight and a different vantage point to be weighed in decision-making. The public must have confidence in the judicial system and believe they will be treated fairly, and their voices will be heard. That public confidence is best obtained by having a judiciary that reflects the community that it serves. Public confidence is assured by jurists who uphold the rule of law, demonstrate compassion and judicial temperament, are trauma-informed, and ask what happened and not just why.

My presence matters by encouraging some other young, gifted, and Black child who sees a reflection of herself in someone in a position dominated by white males. She may never know she can aspire to become a judge if she never sees someone who looks like her in that position. My presence matters in encouraging other young female lawyers, who never thought of pursuing a career in public service, to see the importance of the role compassion plays in the administration of justice.

As a mentor, I encourage others to know your purpose, follow your passion, and live your dream. That is my mantra. We each have something that

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we are called or destined to do. We must find things that bring us joy and do them. We must not allow anything to prevent us from accomplishing our goals and living our dreams. Making a difference is a choice. I choose to make a difference in the lives of others which gives me purpose and provides great joy.

Even in the light of adversity, we must have the audacity to be heard, seen, and relevant. Just as I am not defined by my Blackness, I am not defined by being a judge. Being a judge is what I do, but it is not who I am. Who I am is defined by my upbringing, my experiences, my intellect, my character, my integrity, my compassion, and my tenacity—not just my Blackness.

