



Interview with Lawrence M. Lawson

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
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Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

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Name of Interviewer: June West
Premises of Interview:
Birthdate of Subject: April 17, 1947

Ms. West: Judge Lawson, thank you for becoming a participant in our project. Where and when were you born?

Judge Lawson: I was born in Neptune Township on April 17, 1947.

Ms. West: What made you decide to study law?

Judge Lawson: In my senior year at Bowie State University, I had an art professor, Dr. Stallins, who worked with the Fraternity of which I was a member. He was the liaison between the Administration and the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity. There were a number of law school recruits who came to Bowie State University and he asked me to go over and speak to them. I didn't want to go, but he really impressed upon me that I should go and take a look. So I went to talk with them, and I became interested. As a result of that conversation, I filed the application, took the law school aptitude exam, and was accepted into "Council in Legal Education Program," (CLEO). The CLEO Program was a program for minority students to prepare them for law school. I went out to the University of Iowa after graduating from Bowie State College (now Bowie State University) for six weeks. As a result of successfully completing the program, I entered Catholic University, Columbus School of Law with a three-year scholarship.

Ms. West: And where was Catholic University located?



**The Honorable
Lawrence M. Lawson**

Judge Lawson: In Washington, DC.

Ms. West: Besides this man, are there any other persons who have been a great influence upon your life?

Judge Lawson: My father. My uncle. Mr. Keith DeLuca who was my biology teacher in high school who later became the principal in Neptune High School for several years. They all inspired me to stay in school and get an education. And it was Mr. DeLuca who advised me to, "get something between my earlobes," because there's going to come a time when people are going to stop cheering and I should have something to fall back on.

Ms. West: Is there any comment that you would like to make to them today that you might have left unsaid?

Judge Lawson: I can not say enough to my father for everything that he did for me. My father had a third grade education but he was going to make sure that his son went farther than he did. My father would always tell me to reach for the moon and if I grabbed a star along the way then I would be a success. My uncle was also very strong in my life. He started me working at the age of thirteen. In the summertime, he never let me sleep until eleven and twelve o'clock, he had me out doing things. I can't thank him enough for all that he has done. Mr. DeLuca is still a friend. He still inspires me and gives me words of encouragement. I would say "thank you" again to Mr. Stallins for inspiring me to sit there and talk to those law school recruits, but he has since died.

Ms. West: After you graduated from law school, what happened next?

Judge Lawson: I returned to Monmouth County. There was one other person who was a great inspiration in my life. That was the late Honorable Thomas L. Yaccarino. When I was growing up--and this story has appeared in various newspapers so it is true--when I was three years old my mother would go to George's Market on Springwood Avenue in Asbury Park; Judge Yaccarino was working there while he was preparing for the bar exam. When my mother asked him what it was he was doing, he said, "I am preparing for the bar exam." My mother said, "I hope my son can grow up to be a lawyer," and he made the statement then, that if he could ever be in the position to help me that he would. Well, lo and behold, when I returned from law school my mother asked me what was I going to do, I told her I didn't know. She told me to go down and see Judge Yaccarino, who was then a District Court Judge. I knocked on the door and went in; I asked him did he remember me, and he replied, yes, I was little Larry, Alice's son. He told me he was going to be elevated shortly, and he had not selected a law clerk, but if he became County Court Judge he could have a law clerk. So, when he was elevated to a County Court Judgeship that August, he called me and asked me if I had a job. I told him no; I started working for him as a law clerk in September of 1972. I did not know it at that time, but later I found out that I

was the first African-American law clerk to ever work in the court house in Freehold.

Ms. West: So that was the first job that you had after graduating?

Judge Lawson: Yes, ma'am.

Ms. West: Tell us something about your judiciary experience from there.

Judge Lawson: Well, after clerking for one year for Judge Yaccarino, I went to work for the State for a year. I worked for the Department of Community Affairs, State Office of Legal Services and worked my way up to becoming the Acting Director. After working for the State for one year, I opened my law office in the City at Asbury Park, in September of 1974 for the general practice of law. I practiced in the City of Asbury Park for twelve years. I was primarily known as a criminal defense attorney, but I did a little bit of everything, except for bankruptcies. I became involved in politics, and in 1980 I went to the Democratic Convention in New York as a delegate for Ted Kennedy. Then, in 1984 I went to the Democratic Convention in San Francisco as a Walter Mondale delegate. I was the Municipal Prosecutor for the City of Asbury Park and the Board of Adjustment Attorney for the Township of Neptune. I became involved in politics locally. In January of 1983, I ran for a committee seat and won. In January of 1984, I became the Mayor of Neptune Township.

Ms. West: Why did you become involved in politics?

Judge Lawson: I always had a knack for interacting with people and an interest in becoming involved in politics. I admired the late John F. Kennedy. I was a junior in high school when he was assassinated. Judge Yaccarino had been involved in Neptune politics for many years before becoming a judge, so the year that I was with him, I heard all about the politics of Neptune. During that time I also wanted to become a judge. I realized in 1972, when I worked for Judge Yaccarino, that there had never been a Black judge in Monmouth County, and I was told then that the only way that I could become a judge was to become involved in politics. After my clerkship, I became an active member, working in the Democratic party. I worked my way up through the ranks of the party.

Ms. West: Who appointed you or nominated you to be a judge in Monmouth County?

Judge Lawson: It was Governor Tom Kean, a Republican. There is an unwritten rule in this state that there is an equal number of Republican and Democratic judges sitting. .

Ms. West: Before becoming an Assignment Judge, what other courts or divisions did you work in?

Judge Lawson: I was assigned first to the Civil Division because the late Chief Justice Robert N. Wilentz felt that minorities never get a chance to sit in the Civil Division. For some reason, the few minority judges (seventeen to be exact, including myself) always were assigned to criminal or family, so I was assigned to civil. However, after spending six weeks in the Civil Division, Judge Milberg, the then Assignment Judge, asked me would I be willing to go to criminal. And of course, I said yes, because that was my forte. So I was assigned to the Criminal Division as a trial judge. I was a trial judge in criminal from March until September, and on September 1, became the Presiding Judge of the Criminal Division. I became the first African American to become a presiding judge of a division in the court system. I served as Presiding Judge of the Criminal Division for three years, and then I was assigned to the Civil Division. I sat in civil for a year doing medical malpractice cases, and then I was reassigned back to the Criminal Division where I was a criminal trial judge for two years. I was then appointed as Assignment Judge by the late Chief Justice Robert N. Wilentz.

Ms. West: What year were you appointed to the Assignment Judge?

Judge Lawson: April 15, 1993. I remember because it was tax day.

Ms. West: Okay, that's a good reason to remember. Let's get back to being mayor of Neptune. What aspirations did you have when you assumed the office?

Judge Lawson: I wanted to be one of the best mayors that Neptune had ever had. I did not want a mayorship that would be tainted with any corruption. There were a number of minority mayors being elected in the country. I wanted to distinguish myself as being a great mayor.

Ms. West: You were the first and, to date, the only Black mayor of Neptune Township?

Judge Lawson: Yes, ma'am.

Ms. West: Well, now being the first Black mayor of Neptune Township, the first Black judge to the Superior Court, and the first Black assignment judge, what significance does this hold with you?

Judge Lawson: It makes me very humble. A lot of people laid down their lives in the struggle and the battle for me to be where I am.

Ms. West: How did your parents feel, noting the success that you have attained and were attaining?

Judge Lawson: My parents were overjoyed. My father was worried the night that I ran for township committee. I had never lost at anything other than not passing the bar exam the first time around. But everything else that I had attempted to

attain I was successful, so he was very concerned as to how I would take defeat, if I was defeated that night. Luckily I wasn't defeated. He was elated. I'll never forget it. I was thinking of my father because the anniversary of his death was Sunday, November 7. I was thinking, how he wouldn't call me Larry. When I was the mayor, he called me "Mr. Mayor;" as a judge, he would call me "Judge." He was just delighted at my success in those positions. My mother is my biggest cheerleader now. I don't have to worry about anyone not knowing who I am, because whenever I am with her, she says, "My son the Judge." She is very delighted and happy about my achievements.

Ms. West: Did you ever have any siblings?

Judge Lawson: No, I am the only child.

Ms. West: You're married?

Judge Lawson: Yes I'm married and have a twenty-one year old daughter. Our daughter wants to be a lawyer, also.

Ms. West: She's going to follow in her daddy's footsteps. That must make you feel very good.

Judge Lawson: Yes, it does. As a matter of fact, I was talking to her Sunday night about doing her applications and sending them off to the various law schools that she is looking at for next year.

Ms. West: Aside from your job with the judiciary and all, what other things have you done for the community or communities?

Judge Lawson: A judge's life is somewhat limited because we can't be involved in a lot of activities. But I participated in midnight basketball two years ago. I was coaching a basketball team from eleven o'clock at night to about three o'clock in the morning hoping to keep young people off the street. I mentored students at Second Baptist Church when Reverend Vernon Matthews had a mentoring program. We had a men's program at United Fellowship that I worked with and I speak at various organizations around the county wherever I am asked to address young people, trying to get them active and motivated to further their education and stay in school.

Ms. West: Could you tell me what newspaper headlines might have had the most profound effect upon you?

Judge Lawson: The death of Martin Luther King.

Ms. West: How did that affect you?

Judge Lawson: Knowing what the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was trying to do for all mankind, not just for Black people, but for our entire society. And to see that he was stricken by an assassin's bullet, that we have such people in this country that are still so caught up in violence and negativism. It really made me aware of what this country was all about at the young age of twenty-one. I was in my junior year of college at Bowie State University. Dr. King's assassination made me realize how important his movement was, and what we, as the Black people, had to do to forge ahead in this country.

Ms. West: What was the climate in Neptune at that time?

Judge Lawson: The climate in Neptune, I believe, was very passive. In 1970, though, we had the riots.

Ms. West: Well then, with all that behind you, when you became the Mayor of Neptune, did you feel that maybe somehow you could make a difference with the attitudes and the way people were thinking? Making them more aware of a community, not just for Blacks but for all?

Judge Lawson: I tried to bring everyone together; to make it clear that it wasn't a Black Neptune or a White Neptune. I didn't want anyone to look at me as being a Black mayor but a Mayor who happened to be Black for all people. I tried to bring cohesiveness, and bring Blacks and Whites together in Neptune. However, there is a soft spot for minority children, and I've tried to convince them that they have to get an education.

Ms. West: Do you notice a difference between then and now?

Judge Lawson: Unfortunately, no. In fact, I think we have taken a step back. I think Neptune and I think all the communities around here have regressed. I think things are worse than what they had been back in the 1980s. And I think that has happened because we have become complacent.

Ms. West: What about the county?

Judge Lawson: The county is growing. Monmouth County is the fastest growing county in this state. We have over 600,000 citizens in Monmouth County, but as far as minorities going forward in this county, there's a lot more that needs to be done.

Ms. West: Cosmetically speaking, or visually speaking, has there been much of a change in Monmouth County since you were a youngster?

Judge Lawson: Oh, yes. There is much change. It's built up, the housing populations have increased, but for some reason, it seems as though when I was a kid, there was more of a "neighborhood" atmosphere among the people. I can

remember block parties. I can remember mixed neighborhoods. Now you look around and you can spot the Black neighborhood, you can spot the Italian neighborhood. I think we're becoming a lot more independent in this county. There is a lot more that can be done.

Ms. West: So you're saying everybody seems to be so polarized now?

Judge Lawson: Yes, that's the right word. There is polarization in this county.

Ms. West: Well, as the busy person that you are, do you have any hobbies, or anything that you do for recreation?

Judge Lawson: I'm an avid Giants football fan. I've had season tickets since 1972. I play golf, and I attend athletic functions.

Ms. West: Tiger Woods fan?

Judge Lawson: Tiger Woods fan.

Ms. West: Other than going to sporting events, do you have a specific hobby or anything?

Judge Lawson: Yes. Miniature trains.

Ms. West: What gauge is that?

Judge Lawson: Lionel.

Ms. West: Oh, twenty-seven gauge.

Judge Lawson: Twenty-seven gauge! You got it!

Ms. West: What would you say is your greatest achievement?

Judge Lawson: My greatest achievement is becoming the Assignment Judge in Monmouth County.

Ms. West: What is the most unusual thing about yourself?

Judge Lawson: When they hear that I'm the Assignment Judge, a lot of people always look for someone older. I guess the unusual fact of the matter about me is that I'm fifty-two years old. When someone says he's the Assignment Judge, people look for someone in his sixties. People always say, "You're not the Assignment Judge." So I would say that's one of the unique things about me. And I still like to have fun. I enjoy my job. Everyday, I get up I look forward to going to work, and I have a smile on my face. I always want to see what I can

tackle that day. I enjoy my work and I enjoy what I do. So I guess that's probably another one of the unique things about me. However, once I get into that courtroom I'm a different person. People say that's not the same Larry Lawson that's in chambers, or maybe at home. When you're in the courtroom, you're very conservative, you're old-fashioned, you're very solemn, and you're a no-nonsense person. But once you come off the bench and take that robe off, then hey, you're just a regular everyday person, and I try to be that way. When someone comes to me and asks me who I am, or is what my name, I say, "My name is Larry Lawson," and they'll say, "Oh you're the Judge." I was Larry Lawson first and Judge second, so that's the way I always like to look at myself.

Ms. West: You're so content with your employment and everything. Is there anything you can think of that you would like to do next? Anything else that you would like to accomplish?

Judge Lawson: No, I have no other aspirations. I have been fortunate that everything that I have sought to achieve I have. I am fortunate to have a good wife and a great daughter. I have achieved success in my profession, so I've been very blessed, and there's nothing else that I desire.

Ms. West: So you're satisfied with your life as it is right now.

Judge Lawson: Yes, I am.

Ms. West: Is being a Judge the epitome of all your youthful aspirations?

Judge Lawson: Yes.

Ms. West: What advice would you give young people today?

Judge Lawson: I would tell young people to get an education, stay in school, listen to your teachers, definitely learn how to use a computer, and be humble. Read a lot, and learn as much as you can. A "Michael Jordan," a "Walter Payton," a "Jim Brown" are born every three seconds. You have to be very fortunate and in the right place to become a star, or an athlete, or a singer, or a movie star, but once you get that education no one can take that from you.

Ms. West: What troubles you about the state of the world today?

Judge Lawson: All of the crime and use of guns by young people, drugs, and racism have me deeply disturbed. I'm glad I grew up when I did. I'm glad that my



Judge Lawrence M. Lawson speaks with Ayanya Snelling, a senior at Asbury Park High School, February 2000

daughter is grown. I really feel sorry for young people and I worry about my daughter when she has a family. What type of world are they going to grow up in? The world as I knew it as a child is no longer there and those things bother me. Every time you pick up the newspaper, someone has shot someone, someone has killed someone, kids are taking guns to school, bombs, threats, school closings.

Ms. West: What are your deepest values?

Judge Lawson: God, my family, and my church are my deepest values.

Ms. West: And what are your strengths?

Judge Lawson: Someone said it to me yesterday that my strength is in communication. Talking to people, being a good listener, and trying to make sure everyone is treated with civility, dignity, and with respect, and trying to treat them with the same.

Ms. West: Now everybody's talking about the Millennium. What are your milestones or do you have any as far as the Millennium is concerned?

Judge Lawson: My only milestone is to see that my daughter graduates from college and hopefully graduates from law school. That's my biggest goal right now, my number one goal.

Ms. West: How would you describe your life if it was a road map: how would it be-- straight, zig zag, up and down?

Judge Lawson: I would say it would be up and down. I've had adversities. I try to relate to defendants that everyone will make a mistake. But, you have to benefit by your mistakes and make your life better.

Ms. West: This may not be a fair question, but I'm just going to ask you anyway. As you were born and raised here in the township, many people have known you all of your life. How do you feel they perceive you?

Judge Lawson: I think they perceive me as being one of them. They don't think that I've gotten too big for myself. They know that I'm reachable. They come to my door, they call me on the telephone, they see me at church. They ask me about their cases. They call me in chambers and I talk to them on the telephone. They see me at the mall, and they stop and talk to me, they see me at the restaurant. I never look at myself as being above them. I always want them to remember me and I always try to remember from whence I came, because it's very easy to be knocked down. It's very hard to get to the top. And I could not be where I am if it wasn't for people in the community to support me. A number of times when I'm riding down the street, someone will blow a horn at me, and my

wife asks me, "Do you know who that is?" I say, "No." "Well, why'd you blow back?" Well, it could be somebody that I know, and I don't want anybody to say, "Oh, look at him, he can't answer me back or blow back because he thinks he's all that." I don't want anybody to ever think that.

Ms. West: Well, see then again, there are a lot of people who will know a person in your position and know who you are, so it's just the matter of courtesy.

Judge Lawson: Matter of courtesy. It's amazing how people will stop by my house and say, "I've got jury duty, can you get me out of it?" or ask me questions about the law, or tell me their problems or something going on in their family. But I never try to put myself above them. I always remember from whence I came.

Ms. West: Well now speaking of people wanting to get out of jury duty, do you ever try to explain to them that it's a privilege to serve on the jury?

Judge Lawson: I do. I tell them that if you have a criminal record you can't, and it's one of your obligations as a citizen to sit on the jury. A lot of people have died fighting for the right to have Blacks sit on a jury. If there is a minority who has been selected for the grand jury, I try to make them the fore person or the deputy fore person so they would feel a part of the system in the process. When I was trying cases, it used to really bother me the number of times I would try cases and I wouldn't see any minorities on the jury. You hope that you get the right group of individuals. But you don't see that many jurors now. In the past, we took jurors from voter registration lists and from driver licenses. Now we take jurors if they apply for a home state rebate, if they apply for an income tax return, or if they get a interest statement. Now there's three more areas for us to poll them from, so I do see more Blacks coming in, but it's still not enough. The jurors answer a questionnaire. I get a questionnaire every week from all the jurors because I want to know exactly how were doing. I'll usually see a couple of them asking how come there aren't more minorities participating in the jury process? We have whites who are concerned that there aren't more minorities in the process.

Ms. West: Do your peers feel the same way?

Judge Lawson: Yes. They feel the same way.

Ms. West: Is there anything else you would want to say?

Judge Lawson: I feel very blessed and fortunate to have had parents who were very supportive and to have a wife and daughter who are supportive of me. But I'm also grateful for the people from the community who have been very supportive. Even on my ups and on my downs, they have been there. They have never abandoned me. I feel very proud that I don't have to go any place where I

feel worried that something is going to happen to me. If my wife or my daughter or my mother goes some place, someone will always know them, and know who they are, and they'll look out for them. So I feel very blessed about that and very happy.

Ms. West: Well, I thank you for talking to me this evening. It's really been my pleasure. You don't know how much.

Judge Lawson: My pleasure. Well thank you.

Ms. West: It's been a while since I've seen you. I wouldn't even say how many years, I can't even count them, but when I was invited to be on the Planning Committee the *Remembering the 20th Century* project, you and Tommy Smith were the first people who popped into my mind. I said, "I'm going to grab them before anybody else does!" So again, I thank you for letting me talk with you.

Judge Lawson: Assemblyman Smith was another person who was very influential. We talked about how cohesive the community was when I grew up. When I was a young boy, Assemblyman Smith was a police officer in Asbury Park. I lived in Neptune, but my father and my mother knew the Smiths and if he saw me in the street, he would chastise me if I was doing something wrong, and he would tell me to get on my way, and when he saw my father, he told him also! I knew if I went home and told my father that Officer Smith had to say something to me I'd be in real big trouble, and I'm going to get a beating at home.

Ms. West: Well, I guess that's sad, but true.