



## A Tribute TO JUDGE DENISE K. LARUE

*By Hon. Tanya Walton Pratt\**

In recent months, the Indiana legal community has suffered an unimaginable loss by the passing of two of our beloved colleagues. On August 2, 2017, Magistrate Judge Denise LaRue lost her brief but valiant battle with cancer. Then just seven short weeks later, on September 21, 2017, Senior Judge Larry McKinney suddenly and unexpectedly passed away peacefully in his sleep. The federal family in the United States District Court, Southern District of Indiana is attempting to come to grips with our tremendous losses.

At times like these I am reminded of something said at a funeral I attended some years ago. When the preacher took to the podium to give remarks, he momentarily looked around the sanctuary, saying nothing, and then finally said rather scornfully “look at us...just look at us...we are a room full of losers...”, then he softened his tone and said “...for we all have lost someone we loved.” And, indeed, we have.

Magistrate Judge Denise K. LaRue was born on March 31, 1958 to Robert and Jewell LaRue in Indianapolis, Indiana. She and her sister, Collette, were just 12 months apart, and they enjoyed an idyllic childhood. Judge LaRue attended Indiana University, Bloomington where she received her B.S. from the School of Public and Environmental Affairs. While a student at Indiana University, she worked as a salaried intern with the Indiana Education Employment Relations Board.

Following graduation from Indiana University, she became the Human Resources Administrator for AllState Insurance Company, Indianapolis, where she handled employee relations matters. While working for AllState, Judge LaRue decided to pursue her longtime dream of attending law school to further her effectiveness in the area of labor and employment relations.

In 1989, Judge LaRue graduated *cum laude* from Indiana University’s Robert H. McKinney School of Law. She began her legal career as a staff attorney at the Indiana Civil Rights Commission. She subsequently

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\*Tanya Walton Pratt was appointed to the United States District Court, Southern District of Indiana, on June 15, 2010. She was nominated by President Barack H. Obama and unanimously confirmed by the full United States Senate. She received her B.A. from Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia and her law degree from Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C. She is married to Marion Superior Court Judge Marcel A. Pratt, Jr.; they have one daughter who is also a lawyer. She and Judge LaRue were sisters in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and close friends since 1984.



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entered private practice as an associate at what became Haskin & LaRue, LLP in 1994 and was named a partner two years later. She was a trailblazer in that she was one of the first African-American women in the Indianapolis community to be a full partner in a law firm and one of the few women attorneys to own an office building in downtown Indianapolis.

As a trial lawyer, she was a trailblazer in her chosen specialty, employment law. Her contributions to civil rights, human rights, and racial and gender equality are pivotal to the improvements of our society and are now part of her legacy. Denise LaRue tried the first American with Disabilities Act case and the first Family and Medical Leave Act case before juries in the Southern District of Indiana – and she won. She also handled claims asserting various constitutional violations of due process rights, free speech, and political association violations, wage and hour violations, and claims under an array of federal labor acts.

On May 11, 2011, Denise LaRue was appointed to the United States District Court, Southern District of Indiana, as a Magistrate Judge. She possessed all of the qualities of a good judge — patience, a strong work ethic, impartiality, a good listener, decisiveness and she resolved cases efficiently. She ensured that both sides felt the justice process was fair. But most importantly, we could always depend on Judge LaRue to make sound, well-reasoned decisions. All of our magistrate judges are wonderful and efficient, but Judge LaRue had a personality that was soothing and compassionate, yet commanding and strong. As a former plaintiff's lawyer and civil rights attorney, and as a woman of color, she brought a unique perspective to our court that enhanced its credibility and the quality of justice.

Magistrate judges in the Southern District of Indiana handle a myriad of case-related issues, not the least of which are settlement conferences. These conferences can be emotionally draining

and physically taxing and can take hours and sometimes days. But conducting settlement conferences was Judge LaRue's forte. Not only was she persistent yet understanding during negotiations, but by her very nature, she was a peacemaker; she was determined to find a resolution beneficial to both sides. Even when one party was dead-set against settlement and reconciliation, she was often able to bring everyone to an amicable agreement and mutual understanding. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

In one of our final conversations, Judge LaRue told me that she loved her job ... she loved being a magistrate judge. She had an exceptional appreciation for the work that she was doing. Without question, she provided an important service to the court, to the lawyers and litigants who appeared before her, to the community that we live in, and to the nation that she so faithfully served. Her many rulings will have long standing value.

Judge LaRue served on the Local Rules Advisory Committee and Pro Bono Committee for the Southern District of Indiana. She was also a member of the Federal Magistrate Judges Association, Seventh Circuit Bar Association, and a Master with the Indianapolis American Inn of Court (President 2014-2016). She was a life member of the Marion County Bar Association. She served as a frequent speaker for continuing legal education courses, including a course on Civility in the Profession for the IBA's Applied Professionalism Course. In 2007, Judge LaRue received the prestigious Antoinette Dakin Leach Award from the Indianapolis Bar Association Women in Law Division.

For several years, she volunteered with the Chicago-based organization Just The Beginning — A Pipeline Organization. The primary purpose of this organization is to inspire minority students to enter the legal profession, convince them that a career in the legal profession is attainable, and assist them in college and law school admission and preparation, internships and clerkships. By working with Just the Beginning, her goal

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was to help design a more diverse justice system at both the state and federal levels.

Hers was a life well lived and in addition to judicial responsibilities, Judge LaRue was active in the community. She was a Diamond Life Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., a member of the Indianapolis Chapter of Links, Inc., and an Associate member of Jack & Jill of America.

An avid reader, Judge LaRue prided herself on completing several novels during family vacations. She also loved the friendships and the book discussions during her monthly book club, "BookLovers" meetings. She was the 2007 Indianapolis Business Journal (IBJ) Indiana Super Lawyer and appeared in Who's Who of Black Indianapolis for several years. In 2012, Judge LaRue was nominated as a "Break Through Woman" by the 100 National Coalition of Black Women and also received the Achievement in Public Service Award from the Center for Leadership Development.

Judge LaRue had deep ties to her church and was a 50 year plus member of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis. She was involved in many aspects of her church community, including serving as Chair of the Women's Day Luncheon for two years, and at the time of her passing, she was an Elder.

Most importantly, Denise LaRue was a family woman. The love of her life was her son, Robert. She was a fantastic artist and created many pieces of art which were displayed in her home. She had a love for travel, good food, dancing, singing, and family, Judge LaRue enjoyed every aspect of her life. She leaves behind her beloved son, Robert, her devoted sister, Collette Duvall, and her adoring parents, Robert and Jewell LaRue.

There have been numerous articles and glowing tributes to Denise K. LaRue over the past few weeks. But what many may not know, is the grace and dignity with which she battled

cancer. She was accepting of God's will and spoke of the full and wonderful life that she had lived. Over the final few months of her life, through her strength, courage and grace, she gave all of us who spent time with her a final, wonderful gift. She brought together relatives and friends from different parts of her life, who learned over those long, hard days to laugh, love, respect, support, and grieve with each other. If it is indeed true that we can be judged by those with whom we surround ourselves, then in her death, Denise LaRue's life can be viewed as a magnificent triumph.

We will miss our dear friend, but we can all be grateful for the time that she shared with us and be grateful for having had the opportunity to know her, to love her, and to call her our friend. So, Judge LaRue, on behalf of your colleagues and friends, I thank you. I salute you for your brilliant mind, your passion for and commitment to justice, your kindness to and nurturing of others, your generosity, your moral leadership, your patience and understanding, for your spirituality and acceptance of God's will, for your deep devotion to your family, for your truth, and for your uncritical acceptance and love.

Goodnight, Judge Denise K. LaRue. Sweet dreams. And rest assured that your son Robert, your sister Collette, and your mom and dad, will be held close, protected, loved, and supported by your family, your friends, and this community.

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