



Frances R. Johnson

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WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM JOHN RODMAN



Frances R. Johnson, District Court Judge,
Fourth Judicial District

Frances R. Johnson is El Paso County's first female African American judge. Born into an Air Force family, she spent two years in the Philippines, three years in Nebraska, and six years in Germany before returning to Colorado Springs for high school. She went on to earn a double major in psychology and sociology at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

Motivation to Attend Law School

"My psychology studies have served me very well throughout my career," Judge Johnson says. She sensed that people are not always treated fairly by the system and wanted to help change that so "people [could] come to court and feel that they were treated fairly." Law school became a natural next step in her pursuit of justice for all.

Initially, after receiving her LSAT score, she believed her road to law school had ended. However, she later discovered that her scores were stronger than she had assumed and that, as a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) applicant with strong academic credentials, she was a competitive candidate. She received interest from multiple law schools and ultimately graduated from the University of Texas School of Law in Austin.

Building Expertise in Preparation for the Bench

Before becoming a judicial officer, Judge Johnson worked as a law intern, assistant attorney

The Colorado Bar Association and the Colorado Judicial Institute's Diversity on the Bench Coalition are proud to sponsor this series highlighting Colorado judges who serve communities across the state—from urban centers to rural districts. This series invites community members, students of all ages, and the public to learn more about the judges who serve in their local courts, with a particular focus on each judge's background and unique journey to the bench.

The third judge featured in this series is Judge Frances R. Johnson, who was sworn in as a district court judge for the Fourth Judicial District (El Paso County) in 2020. We are grateful to Judge Johnson for contributing to this series; her story will help strengthen our communities, inspire others to pursue careers in law and public service, and advance a more inclusive, informed, and just society.

Readers are encouraged to share this story with students, attorneys, and members of the community. Those interested in meeting or speaking with Judge Johnson may contact coalition co-chairs Judge Cynthia D. Mares (ret.) or Judge Mariana Vielma at diversity@cobar.org.



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- 1 Judge Johnson is sworn in as a district court judge in 2020.
- 2 Judge Johnson receives the Thurgood Marshall Award from the Colorado Springs Chapter of the Gospel Music Workshop of America.

general, juvenile public defender, municipal attorney, civil litigation attorney, and solo practitioner, and served as a guardian ad litem. “The jobs prepared me [for the bench] by giving me a broad knowledge base and helping me analyze complex issues. They also exposed me to diverse ways of thinking.”

Community Involvement and Leadership

Judge Johnson exemplifies community involvement by demonstrating that her duties do not end when she hangs up her robe at the end of a court session. She has served with the El Paso County Bar Association and the Colorado Bar Foundation, as well as on the Fourth Judicial District’s Inclusion Collaborative Committee and the Colorado Supreme Court’s Judicial Well-Being Committee. “It is important to make myself available for others to network with me and to answer questions people might have about

the legal system or being a judicial officer. It’s also important to be seen as approachable and not make the legal process seem mysterious.”

Striving for Diversity

“If everyone looks the same, speaks the same, thinks the same, and has the same background—given that not everyone who appears in the legal system will be the same—how can citizens believe they will be understood or treated fairly?” Judge Johnson’s presence and positive attitude promote diversity on the bench by serving as a resource for aspiring judges and by demystifying the judicial selection process.

Encouraging Future Leaders

Judge Johnson works to encourage law students and lawyers to understand that failure is part of life’s journey. “In becoming a judge, I overcame multiple instances of not being selected to be a magistrate and then multiple instances of not being selected as a judge. I had to persevere and not give up on my goals or dreams.”

She encourages others by saying, “Ask questions [and] don’t be afraid to seek out multiple perspectives. If one person is not available or

won’t answer questions, don’t let that one person’s ‘no’ deter you. Also, don’t be discouraged by someone else’s negative experience if you truly have an interest in pursuing the legal field.”

Rewards and Challenges

Judge Johnson identifies many rewarding aspects of her job. “Seeing people smile [and] watching tension drain away when they hear an explanation of what to expect” is one of her greatest satisfactions. She believes she benefits the community by “being able to speak to diverse students and citizens and answer questions they may not otherwise ask of a nondiverse judicial officer.”

She also acknowledges challenges, including “feeling the need to be ‘on’ or to code-switch often, or not saying ‘no’ when I feel overextended because I don’t want to be an obstacle for someone else achieving their goals.”

Making a Difference

Judge Johnson makes a difference in the lives of those who appear before her through her patience and desire to help improve lives. On one occasion, she sentenced two men to probation in Recovery Court. She was concerned one might not succeed but told him to prove her wrong. Not only did he complete the program, but upon graduating, he thanked her for giving him the chance to change his life and his family’s life. The other man also completed the program and noted that, out of everyone he interacted with while on probation, Judge Johnson was “the one person who showed an interest in [me] every time [I] came to court.”

By listening and showing respect to all who appear before her, Judge Johnson demonstrates an ideal we should all strive to achieve. **CL**

Judge Cynthia D. Mares (ret.) and Judge Mariana Vielma serve as co-chairs of the CBA/CJI Diversity on the Bench Coalition. Individuals interested in pursuing a legal career or considering a future on the bench are encouraged to contact them at diversity@cobar.org for guidance and resources. Special thanks to Christine Lyman and John Rodman for their contributions to this article.