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May 7, 2005

Interviews with:
The Hon. Marie Oliver Jackson
The Hon. Severlin Singleton
Ms. Paula Viola

Judge Marie Jackson

So my reality is: You don't know who you've helped... You do what you were put on the bench to do and hopefully you do it well. And maybe with the grace of God, you might actually help somebody and make a difference in someone's life... Every day you hope you've helped somebody get better. - Judge Marie Oliver Jackson

When you step into the home of Judge Marie Oliver Jackson in Woburn, Massachusetts, the journey into an amazing life begins. Paintings and photographs of family and friends fill the living room with life. The kitchen, the hub of the home, is filled with children's books and toys and a gallery of photographs. Jackson's home is a bright sanctuary from the demands of her hectic life and reflects her love of extended family. The most intriguing part of her home is the basement. Here in the cool dark rooms are boxes floor to ceiling. As Jackson notes, *"I keep everything. Clippings, old magazines, church programs, and letters. It is our history. If we don't keep our own history...who will?"*

The history of Judge Jackson begins with the unlikely union of her parents. The two met during WWII in England. Jackson's mother, Nettie Wall, was a nurse with the Red Cross. She was a member of the Black middle class, an educated woman of society, whose father was a doctor. Jackson's father, Warren Oliver, was a GI in England when

the two met. He was, in Jackson's words, a "baaad man" who was continuously in the public eye, as he spoke out firmly against the treatment of the Black man in the U.S. military. Nicknamed "Gator Red," he was a dashing handsome, self-educated, man from New Orleans who laughed, sang and played the blues, by ear, on the piano. The two married after the war and had their first daughter, Marie. The young Jackson soon became the eldest of six children and was affectionately called Therese by her family.

While Jackson, the current Woburn District Court Presiding Judge, presently resides in Woburn, MA, the Northeast has not always been home to the judge. Jackson grew up outside Pittsburgh in the steel mill town of Rankin, Pennsylvania. The strong, blue-collar middle class town had varied racial and ethnically diverse people, some of whom lived side by side for three generations. Jackson recalls, "*It was a multiethnic, multiracial community. The street I was on...wasn't defined by race or national origin. I can't even describe it. It's very different to be a part of everyone else's lives in a multicultural environment.*"

While Rankin may have been an extremely diverse community, it and surrounding communities were not devoid of racism and prejudice. To counteract this, Jackson's mother fought hard to shield Jackson and her five siblings from the racial tension. Jackson vividly remembers a story from her childhood that illustrated this: "*This was still a time when there was an active Klu Klux Klan. They use to burn crosses on the hills on Homestead. I never knew what was burning. My mom never told me – I'm glad she didn't. We would say, 'There's another fire on the hill.' She'd say, 'Yes, there is,' and we would go about our business.*"

But more publicly visible than the sporadic cross burnings was the reality of being excluded. For instance, the swimming pools in Rankin were segregated. Jackson recalls:

We had to travel long distances to swim. No one made a big deal about it. I actually ended up going to the Hebrew Y[MCA], but it never occurred to me why I was going to the Hebrew Y[MCA]. There was no explanation given [as to] why I couldn't go to the Kennywood Pool... My mother just found other avenues. If [one] door was closed, we didn't make a big deal about it, she opened another door and just took us somewhere else... The Kennywood pool – when they forced integration – they filled it with cement. I can't remember any discussion about the pool at all. I just can't remember. I try to ask myself, was I that oblivious or was I just being protected from it?

The protective nature of Jackson's mother kept young Marie naïve to the full-blown racial tensions of the era. It was not until Jackson was twelve years old and took a bus trip south to Virginia with her sister that she realized what overt institutional racism truly was: *“My mother had arranged with people on the ‘Traveler's Aid’ to be there at the changes for my sister and myself... They did not handle us – and I could not figure out why. [My mother] had already warned us about being careful about what bathrooms to go to. I think that trip was the first trip when I perceived a feeling of not being safe.”*

While growing up, religion was an integral part of Marie Jackson's life. *“God is the most influential person in my life,”* proclaims the judge. Raised Roman Catholic, Jackson's family was ostracized in many ways. As Jackson explains, *“There were few*

Black Catholics in Rankin!” The strict segregation in the churches left Jackson’s family with limited options as to where they could attend services. “*There was the Croatian Church, which had only one mass in English. Or St. Brendan’s Irish Catholic Church, which is the church our family joined.*” While the children were afforded an excellent education through attending St. Brendan’s school, they were denied the social outlet of Sunday school and church that their Black Baptist neighbors enjoyed. Marie and her siblings were the “odd kids” in town, who went to Catholic school during the school year and Bible School at the Rankin Christian Center during the summer.

As a teenager in Rankin, Jackson entered her rebellious stage and began to demonstrate her independence. At the time, she wanted to be completely different from her mother and father, often calling her mother, “illogical.” Interestingly, though, the Olivers always encouraged their children to think for themselves, and Marie consistently did well in school. Jackson also noted that she and her siblings “*were always read to, and there were books and magazines everywhere.*” She remembers reading her mother’s psychology books when she was a young teenager, simply because they were there and looked interesting. In addition, at this impressionable age were sown the seeds of her love for children as she volunteered at the Home for Crippled Children in Pittsburgh.

While Jackson’s parents certainly helped shape her values, religious beliefs, morals, and character, the judge claims that they were not the only influential people during her young adulthood. Jackson’s “Aunt Bit,” her mother’s sister, lived with the family for the first thirteen years of Jackson’s life and took care of the children while Jackson’s parents worked long hours. “*Aunt Bit was special,*” explains Jackson. “*She was*

my friend, my cheering squad, my counselor. Aunt Bit was always there...we shared a lot, and she always demonstrated her faith and belief in me."

Aunt Bit and many others helped instill in Jackson self-confidence and the conviction to succeed. After graduating from high school at Sacred Heart Academy, Jackson entered Mount Holyoke College in 1965 with a passion for debate that she had picked up in high school. She remembers her mother telling her as a young teenager, *"You love to debate; you would make a great lawyer."* Marie displayed her love for debating not only through her college team, but also by fighting against unjust policies. As one example of this, Jackson confronted the issue of Mount Holyoke's outdated school regulations. During Jackson's first three years at school, the students had to be in their dormitories by 11 p.m. every night. With a pleased smile she tells the story of how she fought back and became a *"damn proud radical."* *"A group of us decided we would free our dorm my senior year,"* she said. *"We decided we were not going along with [the 11 p.m. rule]. We allowed men to visit; we put them on the floors in the dormitory! We allowed ourselves to have alcohol if we wanted it. We changed everything. The poor housemother left!"* exclaims Jackson.

Standing up for what she believes in has always come second nature to Jackson. Therefore, law was the logical path for the Mount Holyoke graduate. However, with no lawyers in Jackson's family, and Perry Mason being the principal lawyer on television in the 1960s, there were no great images of lawyers for Jackson. She states, *"I wanted to be a lawyer because Mom said lawyers debated. And I loved debating."* During her junior her at Mount Holyoke she attended a program at Harvard Law School and enjoyed the school; the faculty and administrators liked her, as well. And so it was decided: she

would go to Harvard Law School. But Jackson added, “*I hated law school in the beginning!*”

She remembers her days at Harvard Law School:

We were in a historical transition period. It was the last years of the Vietnam War. It was the beginning of the emergence of the feminist movement. These were the first years that women and Blacks were by their sheer numbers a presence at the Law school. However, the faculty did not reflect the change in student population and the courses offered had yet to reflect the breath of its present offerings. It was not what I expected out of law school.

At Harvard, it was also more difficult to fight and change the system than it had been at Mount Holyoke. “*Having a stake in the system can get you to become a great silencer,*” Jackson states. She recalls her days at Harvard when she was forced to conform in many ways; in a sense, school began to imitate life:

What was it like to be at Harvard as a woman and a Black? You never felt you belonged. There [are] no pictures of anyone that looks like you. The logic of how they see the world and the logic of how you see the world is very different... We were coming from a different place. I had never felt devalued as a student. You would literally answer a question and people would go past you like you had not spoken. It was the first time in my life that I ever felt that I was not heard.

While Jackson may have felt she was not heard in the classroom at Harvard, this did not stop her from being active in the Anti-Apartheid movement in the streets of Cambridge. Her courage and strong moral beliefs were especially on display at her college graduation in 1972. She reminisces about the day:

We [are about to] graduate, and the South Africa protest was going strong. And they say we will not wear robes, we will carry the little black crosses that we had planted outside in Harvard Yard. So I didn't get a robe and I'm carrying my black cross, and I get there and I'm the only one not in a robe. My mother said, 'What were you thinking?' I said, 'I had my little African outfit on, I had my little cross, I assumed that my peers were really going to do what they said they were going to do.' Lesson learned: everyone won't stand up for what they say they believed in.

However, Harvard has evolved with the times, and Jackson respects her alma mater more for the recent changes it has made. Present efforts like placing Harvard law students into community legal services during their time at Harvard, and striving for a more diverse faculty are evident.

At Harvard Jackson was introduced to Vee Figuers. An extremely important person in her life and a free-spirited California native, Figuers was the first person Jackson met at law school. Jackson explains, “*Vee can re-center me when I need to be centered.*” Jackson appreciates her optimism and remarks that Figuers “*has a wonderful way of looking at the world. A belief in people and kindness. She is one of the Angels I've met along the way.*” Harvard also introduced Marie to her first husband, Dr. Peter

Jackson. Peter is a brilliant and dynamic academic who was earning his doctorate in Economics at Harvard when the two met. Jackson was drawn to his intellectualism and they married soon after Jackson graduated law school.

It seems that wherever Jackson travels, good people always follow. After receiving her law degree from Harvard in 1972, Jackson began working at Cambridge-Somerville Legal Services and met Helen Knickerbockers. Helen had reentered the practice as a volunteer at age forty. Jackson loved the fact that Helen “*was a fighter and very smart,*” and the two “*had really great conversations.*”

Working at Legal Services with volunteers like Knickerbockers was a different path from what most Harvard Law School graduates chose. Jackson explains frankly, “*In 1972, a law firm is where I didn’t believe I would be accepted.*” Instead of corporate law, Jackson became immersed in the community and interacted with people of varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Judge Severlin Singleton, a colleague of Jackson’s, comments that in comparison to Jackson, “*No one works harder for the public*” and that her courtroom is a true “*community court.*” It was at Legal Services where Jackson began these practices, continuing to apply them throughout her judicial career.

Jackson got her foot in the door as a judge in a very interesting way. Justice Roderick Ireland, who is the first African American man appointed to the Supreme Judicial Court, was working as Governor Dukakis’s General Counsel for Administration and Finance during the 1970s. He called Jackson and said to her, “*When I’m appointed judge, you should apply for the [General Counsel for A&F] job.*” She did, and Administration and Finance Secretary Buckley hired her, thus giving her a start at establishing her reputation and beginning her professional journey to the judiciary.

Jackson explains how times have changed since she was appointed: *“Then – they did not appoint by political party. Anyone had a fair shake at getting an appointment. I’m not sure I could actually go through the process now and get on because the way things are skewed... it’s funny. There was much more openness.”*

Jackson became “Judge Jackson” when she was appointed a special justice of the Massachusetts District Court in Cambridge in 1980 by Governor King. She was first African American woman to be selected for this position in Massachusetts. The appointment also introduced the Judge to Paula Viola, who began working as her secretary in her Cambridge office. The two have known each other for twenty-five years and have created a special friendship. As Jackson states, *“The person who I think has been a great value to me...has been Paula [Viola]. She’s been my right hand, and my left hand. She’s just been there, solid as a rock.”* Viola also speaks very highly the judge: *“We can read each other. We just have that relationship...that connection.”* Additionally, Viola noted the personal gains she has made since knowing Jackson. *“She’s taught me to have more confidence in myself. She [would] push me to do things I didn’t think I could do, but I could! She gave me projects and I’d be like, ‘How do I even do this?’ But I did them!”*

In 1973, Jackson moved to West Medford, looking for *“a community in which to raise children”* and to be closer to the community she was serving. She wanted to live in a multiethnic community and own a spacious home, like the one she had grown up in. Paula Viola describes the Judge’s former West Medford home as *“warm and inviting, with a big wraparound porch.”* The house she found appeared symbolic of the Judge’s personality, making it the perfect home.

West Medford was truly the ideal place for Jackson. Jackson's home was in the area called the Brooks Estate, across High Street, but still close to the strong African American section of West Medford. The African American community in West Medford at the time lived mainly on three streets: Jerome, Lincoln, and part of Arlington. Historically, real estate agencies did not show African Americans homes outside of these streets. The community was concentrated in one area, and African Americans would often ask Jackson and her husband Peter what it was like to live "across the street" with the white people of Medford. At the time, they were the first African Americans to live "across the street." Because of this, Jackson was viewed with admiration and awe in the town.

When Jackson and her husband moved to West Medford they created a great deal of commotion. Jackson describes what happened during her first years there: "*Children would come to see how we lived...In one family the little girl use to come over. She wanted to see what we were like; she said 'what do you eat, what do you do' It's like, 'Oh goodness!' We were oddities to them.*"

Jackson speaks fondly of West Medford, remarking, "*It was interesting. I still have a woman I call my mother. She calls herself my mother, too – and she's Jewish. It was the community I wanted to live in.*" While residing in the town, Jackson served on the Board of Directors at the West Medford Community Center, was eventually President of the Center, and was a member of the Shiloh Baptist Church. In addition, she worked with the first African American Youth Center and co-founded the Family Network to augment activities for children. Paula Viola commented, "*A big part of [Jackson's] life was the*

church and the community [in] West Medford... people would call if anyone had a problem or if someone needed help.”

Jackson currently lives in Woburn, where she became the presiding District Court Judge in 1997. Paula Viola explains why Marie moved from West Medford: *“She moved to Woburn because she worked [there] and wanted to be more in the community... she wanted to be a part of wherever she was...and she wanted to support the community.”*

Although Jackson has moved out of West Medford, she continued to have a close relationship with Reverend Oscar G. Phillips and Miriam Phillips. Reverend Phillips, fondly known as “OG,” was the pastor of the Shiloh Baptist Church while Jackson lived in Medford. Jackson refers to the church as *“the pivotal center of the community.”* The judge was drawn to the Shiloh because of the Reverend’s love for the community, and because of his energy and inclusiveness. Paula Viola also talked with warmth about the judge’s relationship with the Phillipses: *“[Jackson] was right there and she ...adopted them. They were kind of like her parents... She took care of them when they were sick...she was there for them... We used to have little court parties at the holidays...and OG and Miriam would come...she became like their daughter.”*

Sadly, as the Phillipses began to age, OG developed Alzheimer’s and Miriam’s health faltered as well. Jackson was the one to stand by their side and help them through this rough time. Paula Viola comments, *“When she was helping OG and Miriam, she learned not only about their illnesses, but about elderly care options... She didn’t just take care of them; she learned all about [OG’s] Alzheimer’s.”* Jackson began spending more time with Miriam and realized that everyone had *“been focusing on OG’s Alzheimer’s...people were not focused on the fact that [Miriam] hasn’t been to see her*

doctor in a long time.” When Miriam was diagnosed with dementia, it changed everything. *“Suddenly Miriam’s mine, I’m hers,” recalls Jackson.*

Jackson and Miriam Phillips have developed a unique relationship over the last ten years. Jackson sees a lot of herself in Miriam and as Jackson explains, *“I think that’s why we’re friends. She can see me in her, too.”* Miriam is also one of the few people to whom Jackson can speak frankly about anything. But Jackson also notes, *“[Miriam] is special, but [OG] is most special.”* Jackson loves the comfortableness of her relationship with OG. Reminiscing with laughter: *“There are some days when he would have rough days, he would just come to my home and sit. He would say, ‘this is one place I can just sit.’ He’d just come sit! I felt the same way about his house. When things would get me down or I was upset, I’d go [to the Phillips’s]. [OG] would come home and I’d be asleep in his chair! And then I’d get up and I’d go home. But I’d come to his house just to unwind. It was a safe spot.”*

Another man in her life whom Jackson felt that same comfort with was her father. As the years have gone by and he has since passed away, the judge often reflects on the significance of her father in her life:

My dad was a fighter from day one. He could have passed for white if he wanted to, but he didn’t. I’m my dad. I realize that – I’m my dad. I am. I feel the strength of what he said and who he was. My dad would say, ‘you keep on fighting, because you keep on fighting,’ and you have values and stick to them.

Jackson has followed her father's noble practices throughout her judicial career. Judge Severlin Singleton, a colleague of Jackson's and fellow member of the Massachusetts Black Judges' Conference, tells the story about a letter he drafted on the death penalty on behalf of the conference. He recalls:

I thought for sure the Black judges in the conference would sign on with me and send it to the newspapers, but few did. Marie [Jackson] was one of them...Even though [the other judges'] private view was that they opposed the death penalty for the same reasons we did, they did not have the courage to sign the letter...I was almost ashamed to be part of the organization when they would not sign onto the letter... But Marie didn't hesitate – she never hesitates. If she sees the rightness of her issue, she has all the courage you need to address [it].

While Jackson certainly knows how to address issues she believes in, she rarely talks about what she has done or given to others. When asked about the aspects of her career she is most proud of, she mentions her time as President of the Massachusetts Black Judges' Conference: "I think I took them to a whole new level in terms of their presence and the quality of the educational conferences. I just did what I had to do." Judge Severlin Singleton commented that Jackson has done the work of an entire committee almost entirely on her own.

Currently, as the Presiding Judge in Woburn, Paula Viola states that Jackson is:

Wonderful on the bench. She's very wise and is great at reading people... I've had people to call and say, 'Is judge Jackson going to be on the bench?' Because if they go up in front of anybody, they want to go up in front of her; because she's caring, she understands the law, and she understands people's lives. It's a hard job. On the bench she's strong, but...she can come off the bench and be who she is... She's seen so much...And it's hard, for any of these judges. I use to go in the session and watch. It got hard because it's not television, it's real life. And she's been dealing with that since 1980. It's real life, real people, real situations.

The following story from Jackson illustrates the personal impact she had when ruling on a “real life situation.”

I was walking through... West Medford...and when I walked up to one of the booths, this woman said, “I know who you are” and I said “Oh.” She said, “my brother came before you.” And whatever I said or did – it was like his third time around – something I said or did changed this man's life. He got sober and she credits me with it, which has nothing really to do with me, I don't think. And she gave me [a] painting of a candle because she said, “You saved my brother's life.”

Judge Singleton admires the extraordinary effort Jackson puts into every case:
“There is no one else like her. She is just a beautiful person, an extraordinary person and I'm glad she's my colleague... She will follow up with social workers and lawyers after a

case has left her courtroom, just to make sure things were taken care of... I don't know where she gets the energy."

One of the roles in which she takes extraordinary pride in is that of a mother figure. Children, and her love for children, seem to be a lifelong theme in Jackson's life as she is constantly projecting it on a personal and professional level. In 1990, *Boston Magazine* highlighted Jackson's role in the juvenile justice system in Massachusetts. The author noted that Jackson has been instrumental in making government agencies more responsible, and often uses "creative sentencing." For example, the author explains: "[Jackson] once told a child caught playing with a gun to keep a scrapbook on accidents involving firearms," (Golden, *Boston Magazine*. June 3, 1990: 34).

Additionally, throughout her adult life, Jackson has adopted and fostered children living in her home. The judge remarks: "*Did I go after kids or did kids come after me? I couldn't have my own children – that's not true – these are my own children. I couldn't have children biologically. I had worked with children all my life.*" When it came down to it Jackson realized, "*'Okay, this is the way it's going to be'. I feel like [it] just happened.*" By the time Jackson was married in 1987 to her second husband, HQ, there were five children living with the couple in Jackson's West Medford home.

Jackson speaks about her children with love:

I'm really proud of the kids. They have all...achieved much more than anyone expected of them...Each one is struggling, and it has been a struggle for each one to do better. But I see them struggling, and I see them making it on a day-by-day

*basis... It's amazing what people can accomplish and what they can overcome...
The kids remind me of that. That's a very special part of my life."*

The loving influence of her family and children are brought to bear upon her work as a judge, according to Paula Viola: *"Everything she's done has this attachment of multi-hats that she wears all the time... When she comes in here she's not just 'Marie the Judge.'" And while Judge Jackson may wear many different hats, she has never shown visible difficulty in managing her busy life: "She handles it all," notes Judge Singleton. Jackson is able to balance her life so well because she takes strength from her religion and her family, and she understands that being a judge is only part of who she is. As she proclaims: "I am a wife, mother, grandmother, friend, Christian, sister – I'm all those things before I'm a judge. I had many of those roles before I was a judge, and I'll have those roles after I'm a judge."*

In addition to her children, many others have influenced Jackson throughout her life. In her adult life, she has grown closer to her sister, Carol, and reveals that Carol is her *"greatest confidante, consultant, and advisor."* Jackson is also quick to credit those who were not always sympathetic of her goals and aspirations. *"The people [I] think of as not supportive are actually very supportive because they got [me] to move forward."* Additionally, Jackson cannot pinpoint who in her life has been the most influential. As Jackson describes it, *"Everyone has a piece in making me who I [am]. It's hard to decide if one person was more important than another. Everyone's been there."*

Everyone may have “been there” for Marie Jackson, but it was she who made a name for herself as a superb judge, and even more wonderful person. The journey of Judge Jackson’s life is far from over, as Paula Viola expresses:

She’s done a lot of thing with her life. And right now you know she’s the presiding judge ... but I’m sure she’s going to do other things when she’s done doing this...I wouldn’t be surprised if she opened an elderly home, or [home] for children, or something to help people. She can do whatever she wants because she’s intelligent and learns about everything...She’s destined to do so much...She’s just a remarkable woman.