



Dana M. Hrelc is the Chair of the Connecticut Bar Association Young Lawyers Section for the 2016-2017 bar year. She is also the chair-elect of the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division for the 2016-2017 bar year. She is a partner at Horton Shields & Knox PC in Hartford, where she focuses her practice on Connecticut state and federal appeals. She graduated with distinction from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy and Political Science and from the University of Connecticut School of Law in 2008 with a Juris Doctor degree.

## YLS Diversity Award Dinner and 2016 Diversity Award Recipient, Judge Bernice B. Donald

By Dana M. Hrelc

On October 26, 2016, with upwards of 80 people in attendance, the Young Lawyers Section successfully hosted the 2016 Diversity Award Dinner at Amarante's Sea Cliff in New Haven. As chair, I was proud and honored to present the award to the Honorable Bernice B. Donald, of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit.

The Diversity Award is one of the highest honors conferred by the YLS, and is presented to a distinguished legal professional who has shown both a personal and professional commitment to the elimination of bias in the legal professional as well as the principle that all people should have full and equal participation in the justice system. Past judge award recipients include Hon. Lubbie Harper Jr., Hon. Nina Elgo, Connecticut Supreme Court Justice Andrew McDonald, Hon. Richard A. Robinson, Hon. Maureen A. Murphy, and Connecticut Superior Court Judge Angela C. Robinson. Judge Donald's tremendous accomplishments and impressive career on the bench have demonstrated that she is a trailblazer of admirable and far-reaching proportions, and was the natural

choice to be 2016's Diversity Award recipient.

Judge Donald was nominated to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals by President Obama in 2010, and upon her confirmation by the Senate on September 6, 2011, she became the first African American woman to serve on that court. Prior to joining the Court of Appeals, Judge Donald served on the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Tennessee, where she was appointed by President Clinton in 1995, becoming the first African American woman to serve on a federal court in Tennessee's history. She served as judge of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Western District of Tennessee from June 1988 to January 1996. She was the first African American woman in the history of the United States to serve as a bankruptcy judge. When she was elected to the General Sessions Criminal Court in 1982, she became the first African American woman to serve as a judge in the history of the state of Tennessee.

Judge Donald is also the first African Ameri-

can woman, and the first African American, to have served as President of the American Bar Foundation. She served as President of the National Association of Women Judges, and the Association of Women Attorneys. In June 2005, Judge Donald co-founded, 4-Life, a skills training and enrichment program for students ages 6 to 15 designed to teach children to become positive productive citizens and to avoid the criminal justice system. She recently concluded her term as chair of the American Bar Association Criminal Justice Section, the first African American woman to have served in that position.

At the Diversity Award Dinner, Judge Donald addressed a room filled with many young lawyers and law students. She spoke of the struggles she had encountered in her life, as well as many of the milestones that she achieved, and she urged young attorneys in the room to remember words by which she often lived her life, “If others can do it, so can I.” These words, instilled in her by her mother throughout her childhood, inspired her to act upon her aspirations and dreams. These words helped her to look past and to overcome self-imposed limitations, and they encouraged her to fight for the life that she wanted and the world in which she wanted to live. Her message, for the young lawyers and future young lawyers in the room of all diverse heritages, perspectives, and backgrounds, was the same: Believe in yourself and know that you are just as capable of achieving your dreams as anyone else. As she eloquently put it, “If you can dream it and you can say it, then you can do it.”

Judge Donald’s message is just as relevant to those attorneys who were not able to attend the Diversity Award Dinner that evening as those who were. Whether you are working hard to make partner, transitioning from one job to the next, branching out and starting your own law firm, sending your résumé to your dream job, or just starting your first job as a brand new lawyer, it is critical to remember that you *can* and you *will* succeed. You just have to try. You will encounter obstacles and you will struggle, and it will not always be easy, but if you *believe* in yourself, and you have faith and confidence in your dreams, you can achieve them.

In addition to the importance of believing in yourself and what you are capable of, Judge Donald’s words reminded me of the impor-

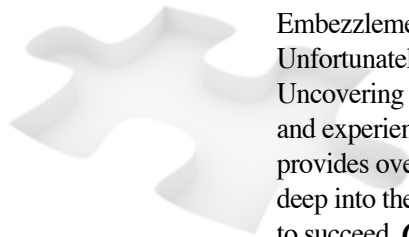
tance of knowing that you do not have to do this—whether ‘this’ is a career adjustment, a career switch, or a career milestone—on your own. One of the many benefits of membership in the Young Lawyer Section is that we are a community of diverse new and young lawyers who frequently encounter the same obstacles and the same struggles, and we work together to pick each other up. Do

not be afraid to ask for or accept help, as we are all rooting for each other’s success!

It was truly an honor and a privilege to welcome Hon. Bernice B. Donald to Connecticut and to give her the 2016 YLS Diversity Award. I am so grateful for her visit and her message, and am excited to call our 2016 Diversity Award Dinner a tremendous success.

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