

In Response to Arkansas Democrat-Gazette's, "Newest Justice Cheered in State" Article

In the above-referenced article that appeared in yesterday's *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, I noticed that the reporters quoted from some candidates involved in two contested races without any quotes from their opponents.

Is your paper supporting LaTonya Austin Honorable over former Judge Ernest Sanders for the seat in Pulaski County Circuit Court Fifth Division that is being vacated by Judge Wendell Griffen?

Is your paper supporting Brenda Stallings over Cara Connors for Pulaski County Circuit Court Twelfth Division for the seat being vacated by Judge Alice Gray?

When I was a newspaper reporter for *The Pine Bluff Commercial*, with my immediate boss being Kathy Wells, I knew better than to appear to give favoritism to candidates in contested races.

Moreover, I am concerned that the contents of the article were shallow in its presentation of the plight of African American female candidates, particularly, with respect to the situation in Pulaski County. African American males are just as marginalized in seeking judicial positions, which is why we have subdistricts from which Sanders is competing against Honorable and Connors is competing against Stallings. The *Hunt Decree*, which established subdistricts in Pulaski County, as well as in several other jurisdictions in the state, acknowledges the difficulties *all* African Americans have had in being elected to judgeships in Arkansas---not just African American females. This is evident from the fact that we still do not have an elected African American of either gender on the Arkansas Supreme Court, and we now have only one on the Arkansas Court of Appeals. It is underscored in defeats Judge Griffen had in running for the Arkansas Supreme Court and for reelection to the Court of Appeals, as well as in the loss of now-United States Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Lavenski Smith when he lost a race for a seat on the Arkansas Court of Appeals.

With the creation of the subdistrict in Pulaski County, five out of 17 circuit judgeship seats were placed within majority-black voting districts. Black women have always been among the number elected to those positions. When I was elected in November of 1992, I was elected along with former Judge Morris Thompson and Judge Alice Gray. We joined former Judge Joyce Williams Warren and former Judge Wiley Branton, Jr., who were already in place, because Judge Warren had been elected without opposition to a circuit judgeship in 1990, and Judge Branton had been appointed to a newly-created position. Indeed, Judge Warren is the first African American of either gender to have been elected to a circuit judgeship in the entire history of the State of Arkansas.

From the outset, two of the five seats in this subdistrict were held by African American women. That changed two years ago, so that now three of the five seats are held by black women, namely, Judge Gray, Judge Shanice Johnson and Judge Tjuana Byrd. The only two seats held by African American males are those of Judge Wendell Griffen and Judge Leon Johnson.

If former Judge Sanders does not win the seat occupied by Judge Griffen, Judge Leon Johnson will become the only African American male on the circuit bench in Pulaski County as of January 1, 2023. Are African American males an endangered species on the circuit court bench in Pulaski County?

I think your reporters should explore a more in-depth analysis of diversity on the bench. At minimum, they should give equal time to all of the candidates for office in "news" stories.

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