

A Black Woman's Journey to the State House

Story by Kyndall Hudson

Photos Courtesy of Patricia Jessamy

Patricia Jessamy is a retired State's Attorney for the city of Baltimore, Maryland. She was the state's top prosecutor for sixteen years before retiring. However, Attorney Jessamy's journey began in the segregated South. Patricia was born on a family-owned farm in Hollandale, Mississippi in 1948. Growing up in the South during segregation and the Civil Rights Movement, she was able to watch her mother become a community activist when the city of Hollandale continued to restrict African-American citizens' full access to public buildings and accommodations after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. In 1965, Attorney Jessamy's parents were members of a group of parents who sued the city of Hollandale for denying such rights based on the new civil rights statute that called for the integration of public accommodations. As part of that process, she had the opportunity to go to the Federal District Court with her parents to watch the proceedings. That was her first time in a courtroom. It was an amazing transformative experience that showed her that she could really become a lawyer.

Attorney Jessamy's journey to the State House began at Jackson State University, in Jackson, Mississippi, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in History and Political Science. She then went on to study law at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) School of Law. Her first job after graduation was as a part-time Public Defender. Two years after working in that position, Attorney Jessamy moved to Flint, Michigan, where she became a prosecutor. She worked on the Michigan Civil Rights Commission board and the Legal Services of Eastern Michigan. She also had the opportunity to work in Kansas City, Kansas before becoming the first woman to serve as the Baltimore City State's Attorney.

Attorney Jessamy's sixteen years as Baltimore's State's Attorney were her most memorable times as an attorney. Of that time, she says "Thank God I passed [the Maryland bar exam] the first time and I got a job as a prosecutor in the Baltimore City State's Attorney's office. And I enjoyed it. I thoroughly enjoyed being a prosecutor." She was in the economic crimes unit and was a staff attorney. Patricia was hired by Kurt Schmoke, who was the State's Attorney at the time, and later became Mayor of



Attorney Jessamy in the West Wing of the White House.



Attorney Jessamy with President Barack Obama.

Baltimore City. After just a year on the job, she became Chief of the Economic Crimes Unit. And as they say, “the rest is history.” When Kurt Schmoke became Mayor, his deputy, Stuart Sand, appointed her as a deputy. In that position, she oversaw all the administrative divisions of the State's Attorney's office. And when Schmoke left, she was appointed the interim State's Attorney. When that term ended, she was elected to the position for three terms. That led to her holding the office of State's Attorney for 16 years. Upon

reflection of that accomplishment, Patricia says “Wow. That's amazing. Yeah. So I've had a truly diverse career.”

The diversity of Attorney Jessemy's career contributed greatly to her success. She has worked in private practice. During this time, she filed numerous civil rights lawsuits. When she was in Mississippi, she was considered a Section Five Voting Rights Litigation specialist because she filed a case against the City of Grenada. At one point she had over two hundred lawyers working for her. Attorney Jessemy says, she always asked new attorneys if they love the law, because “if you love it, then you want to go to work every day.” It is clear Attorney Jessemy loves the law.



Attorney Jessamy being presented the God Record Award for her work against recording piracy.

When asked what discrimination looks like for her as a Black woman leader, Attorney Jessemy says that she “actually experienced more discrimination as a woman than she did as a Black person.” She recalls one particular incident in court in the southern district of Mississippi where it was clear to her that the judge did not think she belonged. She was standing behind the bar when the judge yelled out “Who the hell are you? And what are you doing?” She responded by saying, “Your Honor, lawyers are allowed behind the bar, is that correct?” Her response was respectfully acknowledged, and she was allowed to proceed with her case. Although she did experience other discrimination over the years, Attorney Jessemy's overall experience was not defined by these types of issues.



Attorney Jessamy giving speech at the Reginald Lewis Museum.

When asked what advice she would give her 22-year-old self, Attorney Jessemy stated that she would tell her to travel as much as possible. Attorney Jessemy says, “If you have an opportunity to travel, whatever the age, do it. It broadens your perspective to see places outside of where you live.” When she was Chair of the Board of the Elijah Cummings Youth in Israel Program, she would send kids to Israel every year. When they came back, they were different. She recalls, “They weren't just students at a Baltimore City or Baltimore County or Howard County High School, they were world citizens. Wow. Yes. And their vision of themselves and what they were capable of doing, their vision of the world, and how everything changed for the better.” From that experience, Attorney Jessemy's advice is, “If you ever have the opportunity to travel, go for it.”

Attorney Jessemy has the following advice for being a good leader: “Well, just think about doing what you can when you can, while you can. And leadership flows because when you know better, do better, my mother always says, I'll tell you that. I live my life by those two things. When you know better, do better. This means that when you learn that what you've been doing or what you believe is not right, then you change, and everybody can change.”



Student Bio

Kyndall Hudson is a first-year student in the Master of Integrated Global Communications. She is also a 5-year member of the KSU Women's Track and Field team and member of the women's 4x400m relay team that won the ASUN Outdoor Conference Championship title in 2023. Kyndall dreams of pursuing a career in Public Relations. She is pictured here with Attorney Patricia Jessamy.

The WLVE project is a partnership between Hassan II University of Casablanca and Kennesaw State University. It is supported by the Stevens Initiative, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, with funding provided by the U.S. Government, and is administered by the Aspen Institute. The Stevens Initiative is also supported by the Bezos Family Foundation and the governments of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates.