

Philadelphia Bar Association – Public Interest Section
Honorable Louis H. Pollak Award
Annual Awards Ceremony
December 4, 2020

The Public Interest Section of the Philadelphia Bar Association created this award in 2012 to honor the memory of Judge Louis H. Pollak, a distinguished jurist and Dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School who cared deeply about public service and access to justice and who gave time and effort to support the public interest legal community through his work with the Philadelphia Bar Association.

The award is given annually to a jurist who embodies Judge Pollak's exemplary commitment to public service.

Presentation of the Awardee: The Honorable Karen Y. Simmons

*Dominique B. E. Ward, Esq., President
The Barristers' Association of Philadelphia*

A commitment to a life of public service is no easy feat. Often times the work is considered unglamorous and thankless by those who do not work in the sector. However, I respectfully disagree.

I believe public interest work is where the true advocates of the legal profession reside. The work is challenging to the mind and soul, but the triumphs literally can change someone's life. Public service work speaks to the fundamental reason many of us chose to dedicate our lives to the practice law - which is to serve as a voice to those who are in need.

And this is why the Barristers' Association of Philadelphia, Inc. nominated Judge Karen Simmons to be a recipient of the Louis H. Pollak Award. Judge Simmons is a voice to be reckoned with, a champion of so many in need, and a beacon of advocacy for marginalized individuals.

Judge Simmons began her legal career as an Assistant Public Defender in the office of the Defenders' Association of Philadelphia. She then went on to be appointed as an Assistant City Solicitor for the City of Philadelphia. Lastly, prior to ascending to the bench, Judge Simmons was appointed Chief Legal Counsel to the Philadelphia Police Department and the Police Commissioners.

In 2005, Judge Simmons was elected to serve in the Municipal Court. Throughout her tenure, she has presided over 1000s of cases always bringing her commitment to honesty, integrity, and fairness in each matter. However, it is Judge Simmons' service outside of work that sets her apart to me.

Like the prolific jurist Judge Pollak, Judge Simmons' has made a lifetime commitment to using her powerful voice and platform to advance the interests of those in marginalized communities through her philanthropic service and support of civil rights. Beyond juggling her busy court calendar, family, and mentees, she is active in assorted organizations throughout the greater Philadelphia region. Currently, she serves as the Board Vice Chair of Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity, is fulfilling her appointment by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to the inaugural

Continuing Judicial Education Board of Judges, a member of the County Adult Probation and Parole Standards Subcommittee, and an involved member of the Philadelphia Bar Association, the Barristers Association of Philadelphia-Advisory Board, the National Bar Association, and Philadelphia Criminal Law Inn of Court.

In furtherance of her dedication to creating a pipeline for young lawyers, Judge Simmons established the Clifford Scott Green Chapter college mentoring program for high school students and serves as a volunteer teacher for the Philadelphia Bar Association's Advancing Civics Education program. And because she is civil rights advocate to the core she has been a lecturer on numerous cutting-edge legal issues in law enforcement and legal training seminars, such as the "Intersection of the 1st Amendment and Criminal Law", "Racial Justice", Bias and the Courts", and "The Impact of the Black Lives Matter Movement."

Not bad for a girl from Jacksonville, FL who just came to the NE for law school. Speaking directly to her service with the Barristers' Judge Simmons is a mentor to many young Black women in the profession, a #goals for us to aspire to, and a trailblazer we hope to follow.

Without further ado, I would like to introduce Judge Karen Y. Simmons, the 2020 Judge Louis H. Pollak Award recipient.

Remarks of the Honorable Karen Yvette Simmons
Recipient of the 2020 Louis H. Pollak Award

Thank you! I thank the Philadelphia Bar Association's Public Interest Section and its Awards Committee for choosing me to be the recipient of this distinguished honor, named after one of the most respected, admired, and honorable jurist to wear the Black Robe. I promise you I will work relentlessly to uphold his legacy and make you proud.

Congratulations Judge Powell and Jennifer Clarke, Esq. for your recognitions this evening.

I must thank the Barristers Association and our President, Dominique Ward, and Courtney Munnings for thinking enough of me to nominate me for this honor. To be recognized by my people, my tribe, for doing the work I love, and doing it the way I think it should be done, warms my heart.

I must also thank and acknowledge my foundation -- my mom, sisters, brother and all my family and friends who love and care about me and who are responsible for making me the person, the woman, the judge, and the recipient of this award.

Last, but not least, I thank the 2 most important men in my life. My husband John, - for just letting me be me. For being confident & secure to sit back, and let me spread my wings whenever & however I see fit, and for always supporting & loving me, and believing in me, even when I doubt myself. To the love of my life: my son Chazz. I was taught God gives everyone a purpose. You are the reason I want to be better, the reason I must be my best always!

Message

Maya Angelou Said:

“Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth!”

James Baldwin Said:

“To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time.”

I have spent my entire judicial career trying to combine and reconcile these 2 realities of my life. 2020 has been a hard year for most of us, but I remain hopeful that as long as we take care of each other; give some of ourselves to others, and to causes and organizations that positively impact society; and fight for what’s right, even when it’s not popular, everything will be alright.

I had no idea what words I would say today. I was overwhelmed because people like me aren’t usually recognized by the Bar Association with such a distinguished honor named after such an amazing and learned jurist.

I was overwhelmed today because my mentor Thurgood Mathews was laid to rest today. I reflected on how he is partly responsible for my love affair with the law and social justice, and giving criminal law everything I have. He laid the foundation for my belief that a Judge is so much more than presiding over cases. For me, much of the work starts when I leave the Criminal Justice Center and:

- Walk into a school and help students prepare their college applications and personal statements,

- Or walk into a Church or Community Center and participate in a Know-Your-Rights Symposium,

- Or work with the “Black at Masterman” students to figure out when the School District is going to pay attention to their reality & do something to stop the racism and discrimination that those young people experience, just so they can get the best Public School Education this city has to offer,

- Or when I sit on the Board of Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity and admire everyone connected to this organization in our fight to even the playing field for the men and women who shouldn’t have to pay a life - long price for their mistakes,

- Or when I sit on the Barristers’ Advisory Board and do the heartfelt, meaningful work they continue to do. From mentoring young law students & lawyers, to distributing Thanksgiving Baskets, to giving Law School Scholarships.

A few years ago I went to Thurgood & told him I was tired, and I needed to do something else. That this Judge thing wasn’t working for me anymore. That the daggers, racist notes and battles were too much. That all of this wasn’t what I signed up for.

And in the fashion that only Thurgood could do, and I would only accept from him, he grimaced, stared at me, and said: “Your work is just beginning.” That I hadn’t earned the right to be tired. That Black folks fought & died so I could be here and make a difference in other’s lives.

He moved in close and said “it was okay to get frustrated & disheartened, and even cry (but reminded me, we don’t ever cry). But we never give up. We never stop, because there is too much work left to be done, too many people who need to see me doing what I do to know anything & everything is possible.” He reminded me that if I was frustrated, to think about how the folks on the opposite side of me must be feeling when dealing with me.

Thurgood reminded me that as long as I was making a difference & giving back to people who needed it most, then I was good. That as long as I was upsetting the system and frustrating narrow-minded people who were comfortable in their privilege, then I was good. He ended our conversation by getting up from the table in the lobby of the Ritz Carlton, and saying “Now Shut-Up, go to work, and think about where we are, and how we got here.”

So I must say: I am thankful for this Award, & I will continue to work in the spirit of Judge Pollak by giving my significant efforts to serve the Public’s Interest and Increase Access to Justice, and make sure I am deserving of the respect and admiration of my Family, Friends, Colleagues, Associates and Thurgood.

As Representative John Lewis said (and I whole-heartedly believe),

“I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the water to create many ripples.”

Now let’s all go out and get into some “Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble”

Thank You!!!!