

Leaving a Troubled Youth Behind

Judge brings unique perspectives

BY CHARITY PRATER
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

For a man who grew up in Compton, otherwise known as South-Central Los Angeles, Kenneth Walker has come a long way to become who he is today.

An African-American man who grew up in poverty and hung around friends that were into crime and drugs, Walker is an example of the obstacles in life that can be overcome with persistence and a dedication to learning.

This spring, Gov. Ted Kulongoski made the long-time Portland attorney one of only two black judges in the state court system by his appointment as an Oregon Circuit Court Judge in Multnomah County.

Walker's life began to turn around when he left Los Angeles in 1970 at the age of 17 to get his GED through a special program at Washington State University. He was then able to take his GED back to his high school in LA and receive a diploma. It was

on his return to LA that he realized the severity of crime and poverty and knew that he wanted to return to the Pacific Northwest.

"When I lived there as a child, I could not see the forest through the trees," says Walker, "It was not until I left that I could really see how bad that place really was. I knew that was not the place for me."

Once he returned to Oregon permanently, he began attending Lane Community College in Eugene where he was the Vice President of the student body. Soon, he was elected to the National Student Association and had the opportunity to live in Washington, D.C. for a year.

In 1976, he graduated from the University of Oregon where he earned his Bachelor of Arts in community service and public affairs.

"I thought that I would get a good job after I earned my B.A. but when I got to Portland I got a job as a night security guard working for \$600 a month," says Walker, "That is when I realized that I wanted to go to law school."

In 1980, he graduated from law school and began working as a general attorney. Only three years later Walker started the first African-American law firm in Oregon, which kept him busy for 17 years, until his appointment to the bench in March.



PHOTO BY CHARITY PRATER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Circuit Court Judge Kenneth Walker is proud of the diversity he brings to the bench.

"I am almost scared to tell people how fun it is to have this job!" says Walker. "There was so much pressure to win being an attorney and now there is no pressure anymore."

As a hobby, Walker is a football official for varsity and junior varsity teams.

"Being a judge is a lot like football. You call the balls and strikes. Make sure people

are treated equally. Make the game fair and let the chips fall where they may," says Walker. "The first day I was appointed I knew that this was the perfect job for me."

He now works to maintain quality and balance in the courtroom. He makes sure that everyone of every race and gender is

continued ▼ *on page A3*

Judge bring unique perspective to bench

continued ▲ *from Front*

treated fairly, both professionally and intellectually.

Walker is proud that he was able to bring diversity to the bench. "It is important for everyone to reach out and identify with people of other races. The more people you meet the smarter you will become," says Walker.

Coming from a difficult childhood, Walker sympathizes with those that are struggling financially, with drug use, and those that turn

to crime.

"I would say that 99 percent of the criminal justice system is due to poverty," says Walker. "I see myself on the other side of the bench all the time. It was a very real future for me growing up where I did and I am thankful I had the opportunity to get out of LA."

For someone who has come so far, Walker is an example for all young people. Where are his friends from Compton today?

"They are either dead or spending life in prison," says Walker.