



The Trailblazers

Honoring the First 50 years of
Black Prosecutors in Mecklenburg County



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From breaking through barriers and challenging the status quo, these pioneers left their marks on the Charlotte community and the justice system as a whole. While they only represent a sampling of Black prosecutors who have worked at the District Attorney's Office, their stories shed light on the struggles, triumphs, and commitment to equity within the criminal justice system.

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Breaking New Ground



Clifton Johnson

Clifton Johnson graduated from North Carolina College Law School (now North Carolina Central University School of Law) in 1967 and went into private practice in Durham. Johnson hoped to someday become a judge and thought being a prosecutor would give him valuable experience. While in Durham, he was often hired by Judge Milton Read on a per diem basis to prosecute cases and mitigate heavy office caseloads. Johnson wanted to work as a full-time prosecutor, but the General Assembly hadn't appropriated the money for the position. Judge Read had a friend in Mecklenburg County who was a solicitor and needed an assistant. Read recommended Johnson for the job, and, in 1969, Clifton Johnson became the first African American hired as an Assistant State Prosecutor for North Carolina since the 19th century. (In 1973, NC State Law would convert the "Solicitor's Office" to the "District Attorney's Office.")

Johnson worked there for a little more than a year before Governor Bob Scott appointed him District Court Judge of the 26th Judicial District, making him the first Black person to serve in that role in North Carolina. In 1974, Johnson was appointed Chief District Court Judge in Mecklenburg County, becoming the first Black Chief District Court judge in the county and state. While in that position, Johnson hired North Carolina's first Black court reporter. In 1977, Governor James B. "Jim" Hunt, Jr. appointed Johnson Resident Superior Court Judge for Mecklenburg County, making Johnson the first African American in the state to hold that position. In 1982, Governor Hunt appointed him to the North Carolina Court of Appeals. Hunt stated, "On the bench, he was as strong, as careful, as insistent on things being done right as any person I've ever seen." On the Court of Appeals, Johnson became the first African American Chair of the Judicial Standards Committee. Clifton Johnson passed away on June 25, 2009.

In 2012, Mecklenburg County renamed the former criminal courthouse the Judge Clifton E. Johnson Building. At the building's dedication, former District Attorney Peter Gilchrist remarked, "The serious and the minor cases are both intermingled in our district court. Justice and courtroom efficiency required both the prosecutor and a judge who could separate the wheat from the chaff and handle each part appropriately. Cliff had that ability. It was natural for him. People recognized it, he was respected for his ability, his judgment, and his easy manner, in dealing with both cases and people." Hunt said in written remarks for the same ceremony, "Clifton Johnson was one of the best appointments I ever made as Governor."



Calvin Murphy

Calvin Murphy graduated from the NC Central School of Law in 1977. Shortly thereafter, Mecklenburg County's then-District Attorney, Peter Gilchrist, hired Murphy, who served as an Assistant District Attorney until 1982. Early on in his training, he was assisting a senior ADA during jury selection for a felony trial. That senior ADA excused himself for a moment and never returned. Eventually the presiding judge told Murphy to call his first witness. Murphy, left to sink or swim, called his first witness and ultimately won his first felony trial.

Known for his booming voice, Calvin Murphy is revered by colleagues for his command of a courtroom. "The judge is in charge of a courtroom, but juries would eat out of Calvin's hands," said former prosecutor and public defender, Stephen Ward. Mecklenburg County Senior Resident Superior Court Judge Carla Archie, said of Murphy, "We called him Moses, because of his voice. He was the epitome of what a lawyer should be. Respectful. Eloquent. Prepared. Humble. Not at all arrogant."

Murphy, a former President of the North Carolina State Bar, would go on to work in private practice before being appointed as a Special Superior Court Judge by Governor Mike Easley in 2007. In 2010, he was appointed to serve as a Special Superior Court Judge for North Carolina's Business Court, before retiring in 2014. Murphy currently holds a designation as an Emergency Superior Court Judge.



Shirley Fulton

As a child, Shirley Fulton and her siblings picked cotton and tobacco each morning on the Kingstree, SC farm where she grew up. She attended a segregated elementary school and would later say, “As I was picking cotton or working on the farm, I would dream about being educated and going away and doing other things.” Fulton would eventually move to North Carolina to attend NC A&T. She dropped out after three years. From there, she then got a job working at the Guilford County Register of Deeds. It was there that she met lawyers for the first time. “After watching them and talking to them about what they were doing and how they did it, I knew that’s what I wanted to do.”

Fulton went back to college, graduated from NC A&T and pursued a career in law. She put herself through Duke Law School while raising her young son and graduated in 1980. After Duke, Fulton worked briefly for a general practice law firm in Durham, before getting a call from Mecklenburg County District Attorney Peter Gilchrist, who recruited her for an Assistant District Attorney position. Fulton was unsure if she wanted to become a prosecutor: “I was of the mindset that that was not my job to prosecute people, especially being a black person and recognizing that there were a disproportionate number of black people in the system.” Nevertheless, she came to Charlotte for an interview. After interviewing with Gilchrist, she met with Calvin Murphy, whom she credited for helping her see she could wield power that extended beyond punishment. In an interview with journalist Pam Kelley, she explained how she came to see that prosecutors could dismiss a case or defer prosecution. Working inside the system, she would have the opportunity to address inequities. Fulton accepted the job and joined the Mecklenburg County District Attorney’s Office in 1982, becoming the first Black woman to serve as a Mecklenburg County Assistant District Attorney.

Of her time as a prosecutor, Fulton said, “I learned how to try a case. You get thrown in and you sink or you swim.” One of Fulton’s most noteworthy cases centered on a drug shootout at Piedmont Courts, a since demolished public housing project just outside of uptown Charlotte, during the early years of the cocaine epidemic. The case is one focus of Kelley’s book *Money Rock*.

Fulton was appointed to a seat on the District Court bench in 1987, and, in 1988, she was elected as a Superior Court Judge, becoming the first Black woman to hold that position in North Carolina. Eventually, she would serve for over a decade as Mecklenburg County’s Senior Resident Superior Court Judge. Among her accomplishments while on the bench was organizing a first of its kind workshop in 2002 with all Mecklenburg County District and Superior Court Judges to discuss racial disparities in the court system. She also led the courts in developing a system-wide strategic plan, later called the Fulton Plan, aimed at increasing equity and efficiency in the courts. She also successfully campaigned for municipal bonds to build the current Mecklenburg County Courthouse and developed programs to address the needs of non-English-speaking court participants.

Judge Fulton would also serve as a mentor for many attorneys, including former prosecutor, Harold Cogdell, “She taught me how to be better prepared and how to better present. She taught me a lot about integrity. If you wanted to know what was going on in west Charlotte, you’d go sit down with Shirley at the Wadsworth house. She’d give me perspective on the legal system and how it would impact lives in shaping and development in communities in positive and negative ways.” Brian Cromwell, also a former prosecutor said, “She was the epitome of class and decorum and what I strived to be as a lawyer and as a human being. Everything about her, I loved and respected.” In 2002, Fulton retired from the bench and would later become a founding partner in the Charlotte law firm, Tin Fulton Walker & Owen. Judge Shirley Fulton passed away in February 2023.

Ongoing Challenges

Each of these remarkable trailblazers have left an indelible mark on the District Attorney’s Office, but not without facing challenges stemming from racial prejudice, sometimes on a daily basis.



In a 1993 interview for the Carolina Law Oral History Project, Judge Shirley Fulton recalled a time a white defense attorney “would walk into the courtroom and he would ask everybody around the table, ‘Are you the D.A. in this courtroom?’ – except me. And all of them would respond, ‘No.’ And he would go and sit in the jury box without speaking to me.”

Judge Rickye McKoy-Mitchell shared a similar experience when a white defendant was trying to find the prosecutor in the courtroom and “was about to ask the trash can who the prosecutor in the room was before he asked me.”

Other prosecutors shared similar experiences, such as being treated differently while going through security

checkpoints at the courthouse. One former prosecutor recalled a time when they were asked to stand in for a line-up because there wasn’t anyone else around who remotely fit the description of a Black suspect.

Despite these challenges, many people interviewed for this publication underscored the importance of diversity in the District Attorney’s Office and in the justice system as a whole. U.S. Attorney Dena King stated, “I would say that as a young lawyer what struck me the most is the under-representation of people of color, and in particular women of color, in the criminal justice system. Over the years, there have been many times in the courtroom where I was the only female and the only minority, but for the



Herman Thompson

A native of Missouri, Herman Thompson spent time in the 1960s as a Civil Rights organizer, working with the local chapter of the NAACP as well as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). It was while he was involved in this work that Thompson met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who pushed him to pursue a career in law.

Thompson, a U.S. Army veteran, would go on to obtain a law degree from Howard University. He practiced law for a time in Nebraska before joining the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's office as a prosecutor for a short stint in 1975. Thompson would then work on Capitol Hill during President Jimmy Carter's administration, serving as Assistant General Counsel for the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service.

He returned to the DA's Office in 1980. While he's remembered as a diligent, stalwart prosecutor, many colleagues recall his gregarious personality. Often, coworkers would pile into his checkered cab to go to lunch. In 1982, Thompson left the DA's Office and moved to Southern Pines, NC where opened his own practice. He was the first Black lawyer to practice in Moore County. There, he practiced for nearly 40 years as a civil rights attorney before passing away in August of 2022.



J. Charles Jones

A leader in the civil-rights movement in the Charlotte area, Jones, then a student at Johnson C. Smith University, organized sit-ins at Charlotte restaurants that refused to serve Black patrons. He went on to help found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and later joined the Freedom Rides, composed of activists who rode buses throughout the South protesting segregation in connection with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

In 1966, Jones organized a protest march around the entire 64-mile-long Capital Beltway in Washington D.C. to highlight segregating housing. The march lasted four days. Jones, a Howard University Law School graduate, passed the North Carolina State Bar in 1976 and joined the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's office that year as an Assistant District Attorney. He'd work there for over a year before going into private practice as a civil rights attorney for over three decades.

Upon his passing in December 2019, Charlotte Mayor Vi Lyles said, "Charles Jones organized people, bringing them together to change the way we all experience and are treated in this country. He will be missed by many, and his legacy will be forever felt by this entire nation."

defendant. That is not something that was lost on me, but it did not deter me from my purpose and my mission – to apply the law equally, at all times, and to continue to break barriers for myself and for other men and women of color within the legal profession.

Jessica Battle recalls being asked, "Why would I be a prosecutor and 'lock up people who look like [me]?' Surprisingly, this question often came from Black attorneys—and that's when I responded that we should have diversity at both tables in the courtroom and on the bench as well." Battle, like many others interviewed, feels that it's important for victims, defendants, and the community as a whole to see people on all sides of the courtroom who look like them.

"Justice is a human endeavor. If you only have one perspective, you're missing something. Diversity really converges at the courthouse door," Judge Archie said.

Gabrielle Kelly echoed this sentiment, saying, "It helps when our office reflects the diversity of the community we serve. Victims may have more openness with someone who looks like them. It can also improve the way in which we do the work, particularly with procedures and policies. For example, does this procedure or policy have a neutral effect across the board or is it affecting some people in a more positive or negative way than others?"

Brian Cromwell shared this memory, "I'm sitting in the courtroom and it was a domestic violence courtroom. The males

were on one side and the females were on the other side. I stopped and I looked around and the judge was white, all the cops were white, the defense attorneys were mixed, and I was Black. I turned around and looked at the gallery and all, and I mean all, of the defendants and victims were Black. I thought to myself, 'How is that possible?' Are you telling me only Black people commit crimes? I was a prosecutor for the better part of a decade, and I realized that the people who have the charging decisions tend to charge people who do not look like them. The justice system needs to have diversity because if everybody looks the same, then the people who don't look like them are disadvantaged."

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Laying a Foundation



Rickye McKoy-Mitchell

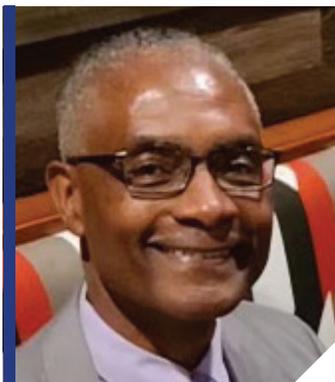
Rickye McKoy-Mitchell joined the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office as an ADA in 1994. A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Law, McKoy-Mitchell had worked as a Senior Trial Attorney with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission immediately prior to joining the District Attorney's Office. She says she was drawn to being a prosecutor by the idea of "having a unique opportunity to make a positive impact in people's lives based on the power of the pen." McKoy-Mitchell says she appreciated then District Attorney Peter Gilchrist's belief that it was not about how many convictions prosecutors obtained, the priority was the interest of justice. "I appreciated having the discretion to be creative and to make a positive impact."

In 1998, McKoy-Mitchell was appointed by Governor Jim Hunt to fill a vacancy as a Mecklenburg County District Court Judge. She has presided in District Court settings across all subject areas and is a Certified Juvenile Court Judge. She was the Lead Judge for most of Court System Committees and was liaison for many Court and Community partnerships.

Primarily reared by her maternal grandparents, it was impressed upon Judge McKoy-Mitchell at an early age that "to whom much is given, much is required." That belief drove her as she has devoted much of her time when not on the bench to serving in the community. She was the driving force behind many youth-focused programs and initiatives including the 17th Annual Increasing Diversity in the Legal Profession Conference, which invites students of diverse backgrounds (8th grade and up) to interact with attorneys, judges, law students and law school representatives for the purpose of engaging in discussions and activities about the process of getting to and through law school, as well as introducing them to opportunities to make an impact with a career in the legal profession.

Judge McKoy-Mitchell is also a two-time recipient of the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, an award presented by the Governor of North Carolina to individuals who have a proven record of extraordinary service to the state. At the time that Judge McKoy-Mitchell was awarded her first Order of the Long Leaf Pine in 1980 as an undergraduate, she was and still is one of the youngest persons ever to have received the award.

Upon announcing her retirement from the Bench in 2022, Judge McKoy-Mitchell said she used her platform to be a "voice for the voiceless" as well as an "advocate for our incredibly gifted youth." These sentiments are reflected in the number of graduations, weddings, and baby showers she has attended for people she once crossed paths with either on the bench or in the community. One of those people is now a corporate manager for a Fortune 500 Company. He told Judge McKoy-Mitchell that he wanted to make sure she knew what was happening in his life as she was the only one who believed in him. "It is because of my own background that I could have been a child 'at risk'...it is that understanding and connectedness that also drive me to demonstrate and ensure that these young people see their possibilities and understand that they are 'at risk' for success."



Tyrone Wade

In the late 1980s, Tyrone Wade worked with an attorney in New York, handling real estate and civil matters. Desiring more experience in litigation and criminal law, he returned to his home state of North Carolina and joined the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's office in 1990.

Judge Rickye McKoy-Mitchell said of Wade, "He was really very good about when he was presenting before me, it was an education for you too. He knew we were talking about people. I admired the care he had. He's a very effective attorney."

Wade now serves as the County Attorney for Mecklenburg County.



Carla Archie

While attending the College of William and Mary Law School, Carla Archie interned with the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's office. She credits that internship with biting her with the litigation bug. She also credits the memory of her grandmother's home being burglarized when she was a child with helping her decide to be a prosecutor.

Judge Archie joined the DA's Office in 1995. She was eventually promoted to Chief Assistant District Attorney in charge of felony drug prosecutions. In 2002, she left the District Attorney's Office and joined Wachovia Corporation as Vice President And Assistant General Counsel. She went on to serve as Deputy Executive Director and the first General Counsel of the North Carolina Education Lottery. Judge Archie then returned to her commercial litigation practice as Senior Counsel for Wells Fargo & Company, where she co-chaired the Law Department's Diversity and Inclusion committee.

In 2014, Judge Archie was elected to serve as a Resident Superior Court Judge for the 26th Judicial District of North Carolina. Prior to becoming a judge, she met with Judge Shirley Fulton to seek advice and get her blessing on becoming a judge. She credits Fulton and other pioneers before her with creating an easier path to the Bench, "She told me my experience would be very different from hers."

In September 2021, Archie assumed the role of Senior Resident Superior Court Judge for Mecklenburg County, a title she still holds. She says her time as a prosecutor helped prepare her for the time on the Bench, "Dealing directly with victims of crime, you get a great deal of insight into the trauma that crime creates. You get a sense of the varied responses to that trauma and how it manifests itself differently depending on the person. Now, what I'm mindful of for people who appear as victims today, I'm reminded not to diminish the impact crime has had on them. Some go inward. Some get angry. You have to approach people where they are."



Norman Butler

A bulldog. That's how current and former colleagues describe Norman Butler. Judge Carla Archie would come to know Norman Butler after he left the DA's Office in 1993 and became a defense attorney. "I couldn't wrap my head around him as a prosecutor. He was such a bulldog. Such a zealous advocate for his clients," Archie said. Former ADA, Brian Cromwell said, "Norman had a style that was very different from anyone else's. Very aggressive. Take no prisoners. Everything he did was from the heart. Everything he did was because he was truly passionate and because he believed that it was the right thing to do. He made me a better lawyer, because I knew I had to bring my A game when he was on the other side."

Butler says, "When I was a prosecutor, I fought for justice and continue to fight for justice as a defense attorney. I was committed to ensuring a fair prosecution, and I am just as committed to ensuring that defendants receive equal protection of the laws."

Butler grew up during segregation. He attended a Black-only elementary school, but he was in one of the first classes in his high school when Freedom of Choice plans were instituted to desegregate schools. He credits that experience with putting him on a path to practice law, "As a result of that, I wanted to have a career that would ensure that everybody would aspire to be equal and that equality would have paramount place in my life."



S.Y. Mason-Watson

S.Y. Mason-Watson joined the District Attorney's Office as a prosecutor in 1992 after earning her law degree at North Carolina College. A Durham native, she always had an interest in criminal law, which she credits in-part to her parents who were very civically active. She also credits her cousin, Clifton Johnson.

Mason-Watson left the District Attorney's Office to go into private practice in 1995, though, in years following her time in the DA's Office, she has served as a critical mentor to many Black alumni of the DA's Office. She remains actively engaged in local civic affairs.

Blazing the Trail Ahead



Brian Cromwell

Brian Cromwell was working as a financial analyst for HBO in New York City when he crossed paths with several attorneys in the office one day and asked them what type of work they did. They told him they negotiated contracts with movie studios on the west coast. Cromwell asked, "That's a cool job. What do I need to do to get it?" One of the attorneys said, "Go to law school," so he did, graduating later from the Fordham University School of Law. While in law school, he realized there was more to life than corporations and the justice system was far more interesting to him.

In 1997, he moved to Charlotte without a job and applied for positions at both the Public Defender's Office and the District Attorney's Office. A position at the Public Defender's Office fell through and, then District Attorney Peter Gilchrist, hired Cromwell as an Assistant District Attorney. During his interview, Cromwell says DA Gilchrist said to him one thing that will always stick with him, "You're going to come across a lot of people. There are some people who are heinous who did heinous things, and you're going to come across people who are not so heinous who did not so heinous things. You have to treat each one of them individually, with respect, and appropriately. Always seek justice. Period full stop."

Of his time at the DA's Office, Cromwell said, "I've had a lot of jobs in my career, from a teller in a bank to a financial analyst to assistant U.S. attorney to law firm partner. Being an Assistant District Attorney was my favorite job by far. You affected peoples' lives, you had the ability to effectuate justice, it was fun. There was a sense of camaraderie that I hadn't felt before and rarely since. A willingness to be on a team for the greater good."

In 2000, he left the DA's Office to become an Assistant United States Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina. He served in that role until 2004 then worked for private firms until 2009 when he joined Parker Poe where he now serves as a Partner and member of the firm's Board of Directors.



Harold Cogdell

Harold Cogdell gained his first professional experience in a courtroom working as a Mecklenburg County probation officer prior to studying law. In 1996, Harold earned his law degree from the NC Central University (NCCU) School of Law. He credits his previous internship at the District Attorney's Office with motivating him to pursue a position as an assistant district attorney in 1997. "I spent the entire summer doing legal research for the homicide prosecutors handling the case of the defendant charged with killing CMPD officers John Burnette and Anthony Nobles. This was back when you actually had to go pull book after dusty book off the shelf to find relevant case law."

Harold Cogdell left the District Attorney's Office in 1998 and entered private practice, where he works to this day. He would go on to serve terms as Chairman of the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners, a member of the Charlotte City Council, and Chairman for the Charlotte Housing Authority Board of Commissioners, where he continued to learn from and serve with Judge Shirley L. Fulton.



Michael J. Greene

"You can't do anything in this world without an education," Michael Greene's father said to him when he was growing up in Springfield, Ohio. Those words, his father's interactions with police while being frequently stopped while out for daily walks, and an always present interest in law eventually led Michael Greene to the Wake Forest University School of Law.

Upon graduating from law school, he specialized in contract and real estate law, before his desire to be a trial lawyer drove him to apply for a position with the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office in 2000. He was hired, and, on his first day, District Attorney Peter Gilchrist gave him three rules: "Treat everyone in court like they're your mother, don't reduce a DWI to reckless driving, and do the right thing."

Mr. Greene spent some of his first days on the job observing the murder conspiracy trial of a former Carolina Panthers player. In his time at the DA's Office, he would go on to try hundreds of cases in District Court, as well as several jury trials in Superior Court. "It was the best job I ever had. We were a small, little family," he said of his time at the DA's Office.

Mr. Greene left the DA's Office in 2003 for a position at the firm now known as Goodman, Carr, Laughrun, Greene, and Heroy, where he currently serves as the Managing Partner.



Gabrielle Kelly

Gabrielle "Gabi" Kelly was hired by Peter Gilchrist as a prosecutor in 2004. During Gilchrist's administration, Kelly says, "The North Star for every prosecutor was to do the right thing," and that remained a constant with each administration change.

This belief also drove Kelly in her work outside of the courtroom. She served as the DA's Community Liaison Initiative Coordinator from 2017 until she left the office in 2022. "We owe it to members of the community to arm them with the information that gives them an understanding of the criminal justice system, the work of our office, and who's carrying it out. What I loved about the initiative is we didn't wait to be invited, we invited ourselves into spaces."

In 2020, during the civil unrest sparked by the murder of George Floyd, Kelly felt there was a need for a greater sense of community, support, and safe spaces among Black prosecutors. She would go on to spearhead the forming of the Charlotte chapter of the National Black Prosecutors Association.

Kelly left the DA's Office in 2022 to work in the private sector. In 2024, Kelly returned to public service as an Assistant City Attorney for the City of Charlotte.

To the next generation

As we honor their legacies, we asked these pioneers what they'd say to young people of color considering a career as a prosecutor or within the justice system.

Norman Butler

Prosecutors must ensure that the justice system works for all people regardless of their race, creed, nationality, or the alleged crime committed, and carry out their responsibilities with integrity and fairness for all.

Judge Rickye McKoy-Mitchell

We hear the country is saturated with lawyers, but I don't hear it's saturated with good lawyers. We need to have a seat at the table everywhere. I encourage you to seek out those positions. When focus is on the interest in justice, you can make a difference in ways that others cannot. Not just in a specific case, but in the philosophy of the District Attorney's Office.

Brian Cromwell

What I want young Black folks to think about is, don't be so quick to judge others, don't be so quick to use your power to punish others. Use your power to be more inclusive and supportive and protect the weak. As a prosecutor, you have a lot more power to do that than you would as a defense attorney. As you're matriculating through your career, every step of the way, think about life as an elevator: once you get to the top, send that elevator back down so other people can come up as well.





Spencer Merriweather

Spencer Merriweather was 3 years old when he held his mother's hand and walked through the streets of Mobile, Alabama, joining a protest of the murder of a young Black man -- a case that would become one of the last reported lynchings in the United States. Michael Donald's murder at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan would reverberate in Merriweather's mind for years to come and ultimately set him on a path to become an attorney.

Merriweather grew up in Mobile as the son of two public school educators. Later, his father became the director of Parks and Recreation in a neighboring town. Merriweather would follow him to city council meetings, and next door was the municipal court. It was there Merriweather got his first impressions of the inside of a courtroom. Later, he had the opportunity to watch a trial in which his mother served on the jury.

"I felt deference," Merriweather said. "All of a sudden, I saw my mother as a group of 12, as a part of something larger than her, and I saw my mother following the authoritative instruction of someone else. So for me, that was a real idea that what was going on here was so important that people were giving orders to my mom."

While he credits those experiences with sparking his interest in the justice system, it was the cases surrounding Donald's lynching that drove Merriweather to pursue a career in law. The case, which spanned over a decade, was the first death penalty conviction and execution of a white man for killing a Black man in the state of Alabama in more than 100 years.

Merriweather would go on to attend Princeton University for his undergraduate studies, and he earned his law degree from the UNC School of Law in 2005. As a law student, he interned with the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office, and he later joined the office as an Assistant District Attorney. In the decade that followed, he served in a variety of roles, prosecuting an array of crimes, including robberies, drug trafficking and domestic violence. He sought justice for victims' families as a homicide prosecutor. He supervised the Habitual Felon Team, and he served as a senior sexual assault prosecutor. For a full year, he was the assigned prosecutor in three different Drug Treatment Courts, where he served as part of a treatment team that helped offenders confront substance use disorder.

In 2017, Merriweather became the first African American to serve in the role of Mecklenburg County District Attorney when he was appointed to the post by N.C. Governor Roy Cooper after the previous District Attorney vacated the seat. DA Merriweather was sworn into office on November 27, 2017, and he was subsequently elected in 2018 by the people of Mecklenburg County to continue serving in this role. He won reelection in 2022.



Dena King

Dena King was born and raised in Charlotte. As a child, she didn't know right away what she wanted to be when she grew up. Inspiration would come, however, in the form of Clair Huxtable, a fictional attorney and woman of color on *The Cosby Show*. "That was the first time I've ever seen an African American woman, a woman that looked like me, in a professional light. She wore a suit, she had a briefcase, she went to work every day, she was a mom, she was a wife. That's not the way African American women, in particular, were shown on television."

She joined the DA's Office as a prosecutor in 2006, shortly after graduating from North Carolina Central University School of Law. "Even as a law student, I knew I wanted to be a prosecutor and to pursue a career in public service. Obtaining a job at the DA's Office in Charlotte, where I was born and raised was a natural place to begin that career path." She worked on multiple teams in the office as well serving as the Office's designated representative for Drug Treatment Court and Mental Health Court before leaving the office in 2008. She then took a position as Enforcement Attorney with the Securities Division of the North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State until 2014. From there, she joined the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Eastern District of North Carolina, serving there as an Assistant U.S. Attorney until September 2020. That year, King joined the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Western District of North Carolina, newly assigned as Deputy Criminal Chief.

On September 28, 2021, Dena King was nominated by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. to become United States Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina. She was confirmed by the United States Senate on November 19, 2021, becoming the first person of color to be appointed as U.S. Attorney in the Western District.



Jessica Battle

During her last semester at the Charlotte School of Law, Jessica Battle interned at the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office. She credits that experience (and watching women prosecutors on *Law & Order: SVU* with fortifying her belief that she wanted to become a prosecutor.

Battle worked as an Assistant District Attorney from 2013-2016, before joining the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department as an Assistant City Attorney. She was named CMPD's Lead Counsel in August of 2020, becoming the first person of color to hold that title.



Regina Hinson Pack

Regina Hinson Pack's father was a federal agent and the familiarity with seeing things from the law enforcement side nudged her to go to law school with the goal of becoming a prosecutor.

While attending law school at UNC, she decided she wanted to be in the biggest city in the state, Charlotte. She joined the Mecklenburg County DA's Office as a prosecutor in 2011. While working on multiple teams during her tenure, Regina was often reminded of the importance of diversity in the office, "Many victims and witnesses who look like us, that deserve to be protected from people committing crimes, seeing people who look like them give them confidence when they call police that they're safe."

Though she says the District Attorney's Office was a hard place to leave, in 2020, Regina Hinson Pack became an Assistant United States Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina. In November of 2023, she became the president of the Charlotte chapter of the National Black Prosecutors Association.

Gabrielle Kelly

As a person of color, as a Black law student, in a lot of academic spaces there is a push for law students to consider a career in criminal defense. If they have a heart towards public service, this is the place you need to be. The role of prosecutor is where one can do the most good. The job of a defense attorney doesn't start until I say, "Yes." Once people can wrap their heads around that process, people can truly understand that there's so much an individual can do as a prosecutor to improve this imperfect system because at the end of the day we are gatekeepers. People wanting to affect change on the periphery, you've got to be in the game to change the game. It's hard work, it's not easy, but I think that our criminal justice system would look a lot different if there were more people who looked like them as prosecutors in offices around the country.

Dena King

Being a public servant is a very fulfilling career choice. Increasing diversity among prosecutors helps increase trust, not just in the courtroom but in the community. We need to advocate and communicate that to qualified candidates from under-represented groups who may have not considered this option or historically felt like this was not a viable avenue for them. It is important to change that perception and to promote the professional path and the work that we do in communities that would ordinarily not consider a career in public service and more specifically in the criminal justice system. Increasing diversity among prosecutors helps increase trust, not just in the courtroom but in the community.

Jessica Battle

The only way to create a more just system is to make sure that we are involved in that system—as judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, police, or corrections officers. It doesn't pit you against your community to work in these spaces. It puts your community in a position to have their thoughts and opinions considered within the larger criminal justice system.

Tyrone Wade

The DA's Office wields a lot of power. Come in being realistic about the law, the system, law enforcement and be willing to listen and learn from every experience. Finally, do the right thing.



Thank You

The Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office
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Mecklenburg County Government

The Mecklenburg Bar Association

North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts

For additional information on the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office,
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