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Forum Faces: The Honorable Robert M. Bell

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The Honorable Robert M. Bell

The Honorable Robert Mack Bell, the first African-American Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals of Maryland, was raised in East Baltimore. Judge Bell has been making legal history since his high school days at Dunbar High School where he led a group of classmates in a successful challenge against a segregated Baltimore restaurant. Judge Bell went on to graduate from Morgan State University in 1966 and Harvard University Law School in 1969. He was awarded an Honorary Degree at the commencement of the 70th graduating class of the University of Baltimore School of Law in 1997. His keynote address appears in this issue of the Law Forum Journal.



Judge Bell began his legal career as an attorney at the law firm of Piper & Marbury. Within five years, he was appointed to the bench of the District Court of Maryland for Baltimore City. He was subsequently appointed to the Baltimore Circuit Court bench in 1980, the Court of Special Appeals of Maryland in 1984, and the Court of Appeals of Maryland in 1991 by Governor William Donald Schaefer. Upon his elevation to Chief Judge, Robert M. Bell was the only active jurist in Maryland to have served at least four years at every level of Maryland's judiciary. In addition to his service as a judge, Robert Bell has also served on numerous legal commissions focusing on such issues as sentencing, rules, judicial compensation and the revision of the Annotated Code.

Governor Parris N. Glendening, following the nomination of Judge Bell as Chief Judge, said that he was "the best" candidate for the position. The pressure of managing the overwhelming burden on Maryland's judiciary in the next century demands nothing less. In his first State of the Judiciary Address, Bell pointed out that the caseload for the District and Circuit Courts in Maryland had increased 120 percent since he was first appointed to the Judiciary. To cope with the ever-increasing workload of Maryland's courts, Chief Judge Bell proposed the addition of several new judges at the District and Circuit Court levels. In addition to advocating for an increase in the number of judges, Chief Judge Bell has forged a path for landmark changes in the manner in which caseloads are managed in the judiciary.

In January, 1998, Chief Judge Bell instituted a long-awaited restructuring of the method in which domestic cases are handled by the circuit court. With the creation of family divisions in the five largest circuit court jurisdictions in Maryland, cases once divided among several divisions may be consolidated into one. Advocates of the family court system anticipate that the new system will alleviate the burden of managing emotional domestic cases that judges currently face. The plan, controversial in the past legislative sessions, is conditioned upon obtaining funding from the General Assembly.

In addition to adding the family court division, Chief Judge Bell has instituted several outreach programs to familiarize both the legislature and the public with the work of the Maryland Judiciary. In his recent State of the Judiciary address, Bell proclaimed "[m]y intention and vision is . . . to inform the public better as to how best they can negotiate what is to some a mysterious and sometimes tricky

path to justice." Programs accomplishing this goal include a judicial "ride-a-long" program; electronic access to court information; a cooperative effort with the Women's Law Center to provide on-line legal forms with free legal assistance to complete the forms; and coordination with a well-known domestic violence victims' organization to provide assistance to domestic violence litigants.

Most recently, the Chief Judge has focused on the need to evaluate the method in which ethics violations by attorneys in Maryland are handled. In a recent article in *The Baltimore Sun*, Judge Bell stated that he would enlist the American Bar Association to examine the lengthy process of investigating and disciplining attorneys by the Attorney Grievance Commission. Concerned with the growing publicity surrounding unethical conduct within the profession, Bell urged recent University of Baltimore School of Law graduates "[t]o take on and grapple with the difficult and complex issues of today . . . and to confront them directly and with dispatch and on a principled basis."

Judge Bell still makes his home in Baltimore.

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