

Washington State Bar Association

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Hon. G. Helen Whitener Receives Charles Z. Smith Excellence in Diversity Award

Champion of Human Rights Carries Forward Legacy of Iconic Supreme Court Justice

SEATTLE, WA [Sept. 27, 2019] — The Washington State Bar Association (WSBA) presented Hon. G. Helen Whitener the 2019 Justice Charles Z. Smith Excellence in Diversity APEX Award. This award is made to a lawyer, law firm, or law-related group that has made a significant contribution to diversity in the legal profession. WSBA President William D. Pickett presented the award at the annual WSBA APEX (Acknowledging Professional Excellence) Awards Dinner on Sept. 26 at the Sheraton Seattle.

Whitener was the first immigrant-born judge appointed in Pierce County, the county's first LGBTQ judge, and the state's first openly LGBTQ black judge. Both on and off the bench, she has been an ardent, fearless community leader and human-rights advocate.

Whitener was the chief architect behind the "Color of Justice" program, which provides girls in Pierce County an inspirational opportunity to meet and interact with female judges and those of color, a program that has since been adopted by other nearby jurisdictions due to its success.

Watch a video of Whitener's life and contributions here: <https://bit.ly/2moTGr9>

"She was making it look like we have a future like that, too—like her," said Zaina Jarmon, who participated in the Color of Justice program. "It was just really, really inspiring."

Whitener uses her position to champion human rights, mentor other legal professionals, and maintain focus on issues of diversity and inclusion in her dedicated support of people from marginalized communities.

She has come under vicious attacks during her time on the bench, yet never shied away from using the law to protect basic human rights and empower others to do the same. Whitener has also volunteered as an instructor with the Lincoln High School Street Law Program, co-chaired the Washington State Minority & Justice Commission, co-chaired the National Association of Women Judges Law School Outreach Committee, and is a frequent public speaker on issues of access to justice and civil rights.

In 2015, Whitener returned to her home country of Trinidad and Tobago—even at personal risk to herself for being openly LGBTQ—to help celebrate National Caribbean American heritage month as an invitee of the U.S. Embassy, a visit that won her the acknowledgment of then-President Barack Obama.

"Judge Whitener is deserving of this award because she is a person who's willing to stand up," said Pierce County Chief Deputy Prosecutor Sarah Richardson. "She's willing to speak out, she's willing to inspire others, and she's very generous with her time."

About the Washington State Bar Association

The WSBA operates under the delegated authority of the Washington Supreme Court to license the state's nearly 40,000 lawyers and other legal professionals. In furtherance of its obligation to protect and serve the public, the WSBA both regulates lawyers and other legal professionals and serves its members as a professional association — all without public funding. The WSBA's mission is to serve the public and the members of the Bar, to ensure the integrity of the legal profession, and to champion justice. For more information, visit www.wsba.org.