

# Akron Beacon Journal

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## COURTS

# Legal minds working to widen path for Summit County Black judgeships



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In the 186 years of Summit County's existence, its residents have [elected eight Black judges to the bench](#) — mostly in Akron Municipal Court. The first was elected in 1967.

But where this history of unequal representation can be disheartening for some, Summit County Probate Court Magistrate Job Perry is encouraged for the future.

"I see hope," said Perry, noting that if there can be minority judges and lawyers in the past and present, "there can be more."

Perry was one of four panelists who spoke about Black history in Summit County courts on Feb. 27. They discussed topics including representation and how the civil rights movement's legacy paves the way for future generations.

Moderating the event was Summit County Domestic Relations Judge Kani Hightower. Human Resources Director for the City of Akron Montrella Jackson, Summit County Clerk of Courts Tavia Galonski and University of Akron School of Law Professor Brant Lee joined Perry on the panel at the Summit County Courthouse.

Almost two dozen people, including two Common Pleas Court judges — Joy Malek Oldfield and Alison Breaux — attended the event that capped off a month of celebrating Black history.

## Black representation is more than checking a box

Summit County has 24 judges across its three municipal courts — Akron, Barberton and Stow — and the Summit County Court of Common Pleas. Of that number, three judges are Black. Two are in Akron Municipal Court.

There are nine Black magistrates in the county, Hightower said. Most work for either the Summit County Court of Common Pleas or the Akron Municipal Court. Barberton and Stow, Hightower said, don't have minority representation on the bench.

For non-White defendants, that means looking around a courtroom and seeing people who don't like them, Perry said.

**More:** [A look at Summit County's 7 Black judges in the past 52 years](#)

Studies show that teachers assess behavior differently between White and Black students, Lee explained. Black students are often disciplined more than their White counterparts, who receive more understanding. This is also true of the courts, he said, explaining that a more diverse school or courthouse can offset this disparity.

Representation also inspires people to take on roles they may not have considered before. When Galonski learned her uncle was a lawyer, she realized she could be a lawyer too. Her uncle, Randolph Baxter, later became a federal bankruptcy judge — which would not have happened without the civil rights movement, she said.

"All of that happened in my lifetime. It's humbling," said Galonski, who is the first Black Summit County clerk of courts. "It's not lost on me that I am the first in many situations, so it's my job to make sure that I am not the last."

Galonski hires employees who can do their jobs well, but she also intentionally employs people to historically White-held positions. In turn, Galonski is creating a new generation of firsts.

## Recalling Summit County Black history

Up to and through the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Hightower said, there were legal challenges in Summit County against segregation and racial discrimination and advocacy against the Ku Klux Klan.

Hightower cited three significant instances when Summit County took on discrimination. First, the Ninth District Court of Appeals and federal courts, she said, enforced integration after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that race-based segregation in schools was unconstitutional.

A 1966 employment discrimination audit led by then Akron NAACP President Edwin Parms highlighted discriminatory employment practices by local governments, which led to reforms.

Then, in 1969, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned an Akron city charter amendment that required any fair housing ordinance be approved by a majority of voters.

"The court ruled this amendment placed a special burden on racial minorities, violating the Equal Protection Clause (in the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution)," Hightower explained.

Recalling their personal histories, Jackson and Perry heard stories from their mothers, who were among the first class of Black students to integrate into White schools in the deep South. People threw insults at their mothers, who were children at the time, they recalled.

Hightower said these stories of perseverance are legacies that have allowed future generations to become lawyers, magistrates and judges.

"We are celebrating because some of us wouldn't even be here without the legacy," Hightower said.

## **A look at Summit County's Black judges**

**Joseph D. Roulhac**, Akron Municipal Court, 1967-1987.

**James R. Williams**, Akron Municipal Court and Summit County Common Pleas Court, 1983-2005.

**Harold K. Stubbs**, Akron Municipal Court, 1987-1989.

**Carla Moore**, Akron Municipal Court and Ninth District Court of Appeals, 1989-2017.

**Saundra Robinson**, Summit County Juvenile Court, 1991-1996.

**Annalisa Stubbs Williams**, Akron Municipal Court, 2003-present.

**David Hamilton**, Akron Municipal Court, 2019-present.

**Kani Hightower**, Summit County Domestic Relations Court, 2023-present.

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