Dorothy Brown: Our Clerk of the Circuit Court

Isiah Thomas helps young men ‘suit-up for success’

Hobson, Lucas gift $25 mil. to After School Matters
Clerk Dorothy Brown: One remarkable career

By Jalyne R. Strong-Shaw
DEFENDER CONTRIBUTING WRITER

This month, Chicago’s very own Dorothy Brown marks her 13th anniversary serving as the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County. These 13 years have been quite remarkable for Brown, who made history in 2000 when she was elected the first African-American Clerk of Court for the second largest court system in the country.

When an overwhelming majority of voters placed Brown in the head position, she promised to transform the Clerk’s Office. As the agency responsible for maintaining the integrity of all judicial records brought in the court, the services the Clerk’s Office provides are critical to the Cook County system of justice, public safety and quality of life for Cook County citizens.

Yet, in 2000, Brown inherited an office environment that was woefully deficient in terms of efficiency and technology. “The Clerk’s Office was antiquated. There was no e-mail communication, no voicemail, and court automation was stalled,” Brown said.

Assisted by her Transition Team of diversified experts, Brown rapidly made changes to the culture and infrastructure of the Clerk’s Office in preparation for the ambitious ideal she had of the agency.

“My primary objective was to shift the paradigm of thinking about how the Court Clerk’s Office operates,” Brown explained. “I stressed to all employees that they should always be mindful that each case file they handle represents a human life. For the majority of people who come to the court or the Clerk’s Office, it is a stressful, anxious time. I told my employees that simply because someone is coming to court, they shouldn’t be treated rudely. One of my first decisions was to arrange customer service training for all Clerk’s Office employees.”

In fact, customer service is one of five strategic guiding principles of Brown’s administration. The other four are: 21st Century Information Technology, Operational Efficiency, Employee Training and Development, and Financial Accountability.

Over the years, Clerk Brown has initiated the implementation of hundreds of new programs and services in the Clerk’s Office.

Under her progressive leadership, the Clerk's Office has an 100% fully automated case management system and an integrated cashing system. The office is outfitted with new computers and up-to-date software and all employees have e-mail and access to an office-wide Intranet, while all managers have Internet access.

But those changes are representative of only a fraction of Brown’s innovations to the Clerk’s Office. “Our goal is to be a highly effective, transparent and efficient governmental agency that is responsive to the growing and changing needs of a modern urban region,” Brown said.

Accordingly, Brown has developed a host of “e-Court initiatives,” a slate of technologically based Clerk’s Office programs that make public services more convenient, while streamlining processes and improving accuracy. The services also save taxpayers’ money, court users’ time, and government resources.

Those programs include: The free mobile app, Court Clerk Mobile Connect, for smart phones and other mobile devices that puts access to Clerk’s Office information at users’ fingertips; electronic filing (eFiling), available in six divisions, which allows attorneys and self-represented litigants to file court documents from their office and home computers; and an Imaging and Document Management System (IDMS), a document scanning system through which more than 80 million court documents have already been converted into digital formats accessible via public access computer terminals.

In addition, Clerk Brown developed online services for conveniently handling payments or requesting court dates or traffic safety school for traffic tickets, and preparing petitions of orders of protection via the Internet, and online database search services for citizens to find out if they have money being held for them in the form of a mortgage foreclosure surplus or an unclaimed child support check. Recently, she launched electronic notice (eNotice), an email service that is replacing postcard notification of case activity for attorneys, and coming soon for self-represented litigants.

See BROWN page 4
Brown is so prolific at instituting tech-based, service-oriented innovations in the Clerk’s Office that one journalist nicknamed her “Digital Dorothy.”

However, not all media folk appear to embrace Brown’s vision.

Part of the challenge of Brown’s tenure in office has come from a few detractors within Chicago’s mainstream media who have sought to undermine her role as a change agent. Yet, confident in her work ethic and abilities, she shrugs off negative press as if to say, this it not the first time an accomplished, outspoken and independent African-American woman has drawn the ire of those who are not supportive of her success, and it won’t be the last time.

“I put myself out there to make a difference,” Brown said. “I have created revolutionary change in the Office of the Clerk of the Circuit Court. My goal is to increase access to justice for people who have been systemically underserved.”

In response to the unfair criticism that’s been leveled at her over the years,

**At the Clerk’s Office 2013 Expungement Summit, Clerk Brown and her staff assist attendees.**

Brown quotes the famous motivational author Og Mandino, saying, “Always seek out the seed of triumph in every adversity.”

Brown possesses an uncanny ability to stay focused on delivering the promises she made to the citizens of Cook County. And, in doing so, she has certainly experienced a number of triumphs. Among an exceedingly long list of honors and awards, Brown recently received the prestigious Thur-}

...good Marshall College Fund Award of Excellence and was recognized as one of the 125 Alumni of Distinction by her alma mater, the Chicago-Kent School of Law.

“I appreciate and am humbled by such recognition,” Brown concedes. “But I am most proud of having the opportunity to give back to the community,” she says referring, for instance, to her participation in the History-Makers Back to School program on Sept. 27, when she spent a full day with students at Chicago Vocational Career Academy exploring the essence of the theme: “Commit.”

That was a topic with which Brown is very familiar. She’s the type of person that goes all in for what she believes, and she is committed to assisting people. Her strong, empathetic conviction compelled Brown to establish the Clerk’s Office’s annual full-service, community-based Expungement Summits in 2005. Each year, the summits serve thousands of individuals who are seeking a “second chance” to obtain increased opportunities for employment, education and housing by having their records of a criminal, non-violent past destroyed or sealed from public view.

Traditionally, only knowledgeable individuals of financial means took advantage of expungement and sealing procedures. However, Brown now brings these “second chance” services to the masses by providing access to free legal advice, counseling sessions with members of the Illinois Prisoner Board and convenient, on-site processing of expungement and sealing petitions. “Once a person has paid his or her debt to society, they should be given the opportunity to become productive, law-abiding members of their communities,” Brown said. “True justice is not solely punitive, it is also restorative.”

Brown has received national acclaim for her annual Expungement Summits.

Although she is considered one of Cook County’s most powerful elected officials, Brown admits that her true vocation is simply helping people. “I live by the sage advice my mother gave me,” Brown said. “She told me to respect myself, respect others, and to serve.”

4 THE CHICAGO DEFENDER • DECEMBER 11-17, 2013