

# JUDGE MABEL JOHNSON MAYFIELD

Judge Mabel Johnson Mayfield had her first “aha moment” that she might pursue a career on the bench when she was a young attorney referee conducting a preliminary hearing on a case involving neglect, abuse, and the need to remove a minor from his home.

“I fully thought there was probably a better solution for addressing this type of matter,” she recalls.

This eventually led to her desire to make a bigger impact in the community, as well as a little encouragement from retiring Berrien County Chief Judge Ronald Taylor to pursue the position he was vacating.

After being appointed to the bench in 2000, she became the first African-American judge in Berrien County.

“Currently, I am the presiding judge of the family division, and I really do love the family division work,” Judge Mayfield shares. “People who understand it might question my level of sanity in saying that, because of the difficult, complex decisions we face. Difficult, not just because of the need to appropriately apply the statutes, but because of the life circumstances that my decisions will impact for families.”

Despite all of the challenges of family court work, Judge Mayfield continually tries to look for the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. “To see something good happen at the end of a case, can give so much satisfaction.”



Judge Mabel Johnson Mayfield

“There are days when it feels very chaotic, but a productive outcome in the best interest of a child goes a long way; it can get me through a lot more weeks, months” she admits.

In addition to overseeing the court’s family division, Judge Mayfield values her involvement in her community. Former Berrien County Judge Al Butzbaugh was a mentor. “He was very involved, and he early provided me opportunities for involvement, shaping my thought process for what it really means to be a judge, and from that position how involved one should be,” explains Judge Mayfield. “I try to give back to the community as much as I can.”

**Judge Mayfield’s commitment to helping families and bettering her communities goes beyond the bench.**



During her time on the bench, Judge Mayfield has found guidance and support through the Supreme Court’s Michigan Judicial Institute, which offers training and resources to judges and courts.

“My first experience with MJJ was going to New Judge School, which I found extremely beneficial and helpful,” she says. “I have always had an appreciation for the concept that judges should continue to gain education and that we shouldn’t lose connection with other judges, particularly those outside of our jurisdictions.”

Since then, Judge Mayfield has worked as an educator for MJJ in a number of capacities.

“I’ve always been impressed with the caliber of the MJJ courses,” she shares. “They’re always working to ensure MJJ is top-notch, and it’s a pleasure to be a part of that.”

Despite having walked through the same entrance to the Berrien County courthouse for 24 years, Judge Mayfield believes it is important to continue to be innovative in the court.

“It’s easy to get in a pattern — you walk in, you go to your space, you do your work, you finish your work, you get up, you walk out. I don’t believe that makes for the most productive employee, and if you don’t get the most efficiency out of your employees, they suffer and whole process suffers,” she explains. “To prevent this, we are always engaged in trying to be a better, more efficient and productive court. For example, we initiated this year a significant focus on cracking ‘N.U.T.S. (Non-Useful Things Sustained)’.

As for future goals, Judge Mayfield would like her court to be a “template of distinction and leadership” across the state, to assist other counties.

“Berrien is one of the leading counties with the state initiative School Justice Partnership that is focused on keeping young people out of prison,” she outlines. “Tracking that back to the delinquency cases that come through, the majority involve students who do not achieve well in school, or do not attend school, thus finding themselves with time on their hands that they shouldn’t have. This often leads to delinquent activities.”

Judge Mayfield is very proud of what she has been able to accomplish so far, but she knows the end is nowhere in sight.

“We’re a busy court, and our initiatives over the past three years have shown good results. Our data supports that we’ve had a significant impact within the county on chronic absenteeism and decreasing that across the board,” she says. “The work is long from complete, but we continue to make significant progress.”

As for her own education, Judge Mayfield received her undergraduate degree from Purdue University and her law degree from Valparaiso University. She and her husband, a practicing attorney whom she met in law school, have been happily married for 36 years. They have one daughter and a son-in law. ✍