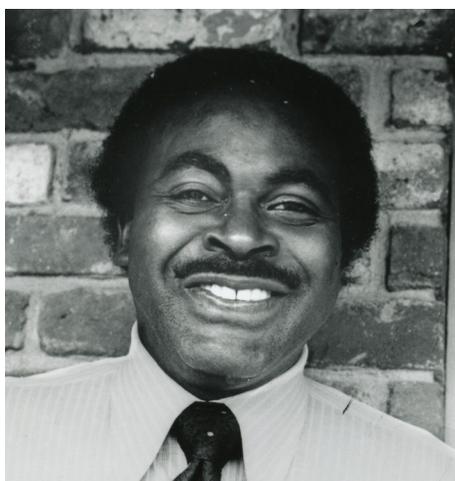


BAR NONE: PIONEER AFRICAN-AMERICAN LAWYERS IN NORTHERN NEVADA

BY GERALDA MILLER



David Dean

(Source: Special Collections, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries)



Hon. Kenneth Howard

(Source: Judge Kenneth Howard)



Gemma Greene Waldron

(Source: Gemma Greene Waldron)

An accurate number of African-American lawyers who have practiced to date in Reno is unknown. Research shows, however, David Dean was the first in 1974, 9 years after Nevada passed the Civil Rights Act. While it's rumored a handful came and went over the years, Judge Ken Howard and Gemma Greene Waldron are the two who made the Biggest Little City their home. Today, in addition to Howard, Reno boasts three African-American lawyers and there are at least a handful more in the rest of northern Nevada. The quotations in this article are taken from interviews by the author with Jeannette Dean (2011), Judge Ken Howard (2011) and Gemma Greene Waldron (2004 and 2011).

The First and Only on the Bench

“If you look out in the legal community, we can still count the number of black lawyers on one hand,” said Howard, today a Reno Municipal Court judge. “And that’s a concern that I have. I ask myself the reasons behind that on a regular basis.” Judge Ken Howard, 59, is uncomfortable talking about his position as the first and only African American to sit on the Reno Municipal Court. “It’s a wonderful honor but I certainly would have preferred if there had been a number of black jurists preceding me,” he said. “And I would hope that I’m not an anomaly and that there will be more to follow.” Reno voters re-elected Howard in 2010 for his third six-year term. “I’ve stood for re-election unopposed three times,” he said. “I really do not know why that is the case. I just thank the lucky stars that that’s been the situation.”

A longtime northern Nevadan who considers himself a native, Howard moved as a baby in the early 1950s with his parents from Louisiana to Hawthorne, Nevada, where his father found a job at the Hawthorne Army Depot. Six years later, the family moved to Reno where Howard excelled in football and academics, even becoming student body president at Hug High School. Using football and academic scholarships, Howard attended the University of Nevada, Reno, anticipating a future as an accountant. He quit the football team when his grades

plummeted, then graduated in 1974 with a bachelor of science in business. He worked fulltime in summers during college and after graduation, moved up the ranks to business office supervisor, for the Bell System phone company.

Four years later, he decided to go to law school at McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento, California. With a brother-in-law practicing law in Las Vegas at that time, Howard had plenty of encouragement to study law. After a challenging first year, Howard reached a comfort level and realized that, yes, he belonged there. There never was a doubt that after earning his J.D. in 1981 he and his wife, Marilynn, would return to the city they've always called home, which they did.

Subsequently, back in Reno, Howard worked for six years, first as a deputy district attorney then chief in the Washoe County District Attorney's office, then needing a change, opened his own private practice. He was enjoying his 12th year of practicing criminal defense and general law for a diverse clientele and being his own boss when Reno's City Council selected him to fill a part-time judicial position that opened at Reno Municipal Court.

He's especially proud of the Fresh Start Therapeutic Drug Court he began six years ago. Men and women with multiple driving under the influence infractions meet regularly with Judge Howard to ensure they are abiding by the conditions imposed by the court. "We've seen some real positive results," he said. "We're being more proactive and seeing them on a regular basis, giving them positive reinforcement."

Reflecting on his 30-year career, Judge Howard said, "It's been a great ride for me, really it has."

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Reno's First

David Dean was Reno's first African-American lawyer, the only one at that time, launching his career the year Howard graduated from UNR, 1974. (Mike Reed, "Reno's only black lawyer: 'World not all adversity.'" *Reno Evening Gazette*, Dec. 7, 1974.) Dean worked until six months before he died, at age 52, on September 30, 1986.

His wife, Jeannette, shared his story.

Although Dean, a naturally gifted pianist and organist, had a passion for music, he chose to pursue law after being blamed for an automobile accident that he believed was not his fault. "He decided he needed to be available to people caught up in situations like that," Jeannette said.

After graduating from Golden Gate University in San Francisco in 1972, the Deans moved to Reno. "He and a college friend who graduated from the same university decided that San Francisco was too saturated and to try their luck somewhere else," she said.

He worked as a clerk for Judge Peter Breen until passing the Nevada bar and then opened a general law private practice. "He definitely was the very first African-American (lawyer) in Reno," she said. "He was pretty well received by the legal community." He would take the cases other people wouldn't. "Sometimes they paid with an old car," she said. "Some never paid him. Some he just wrote off. I think some people took advantage of him." The *Reno Evening Gazette* referred to David Dean in a 1974 profile as "an intense and highly articulate man."

He ran unsuccessfully for several political positions, including the Department 2 judgeship seat in Reno Justice Court, Reno City Council and a new seat in Reno Municipal Court. However, he was appointed special deputy state attorney general for the Nevada Commission on Equal Rights of Citizens and was associate counsel for the Nevada Commerce Department's insurance division (Reed, 1974).

Later, despite his self-described love affair with Reno, Dean approached Jeannette about relocating to Incline Village but she said no. "He never explained all the particulars to me," she said. "He thought I understood. I didn't really. My only regret was I didn't go to Tahoe." Eventually, he developed lung cancer (he smoked a cherry-flavored tobacco pipe all his adult life). "He kept telling me not to tell people that he was terminal," she said of her proud husband. When some of his friends in the legal community found out about his illness, they set up a trust for the family. "It enabled me to stop working and stay home for the last year," she said. "Peter Laxalt, I think, initiated a lot of that. I am very appreciative of that. I don't know how we would have made it without that. I remember him crying so much because he had been reduced to that (Social Security). I reminded him that he earned it. It's not charity."

After the funeral service, Dean was buried in Houston near his family. He has a son who lives in central California and three daughters on the East Coast. Jeannette currently resides in Columbia, South Carolina.

"Considering the ups and downs, it was an honor to be married to him," she said.

Determined Woman

After obtaining a bachelor's degree from the University of Southern California, Gemma Greene Waldron moved east. She graduated from Boston University Law School in 1981, the same year as Ken Howard. She completed an internship at the Los Angeles District Attorney's office then worked at the Legislative Counsel Bureau in Sacramento, writing legislation and opinions for lawmakers.

Taking her mother to see singer Tom Jones perform in Las Vegas set her on the path for her next job in Nevada. While there for the show, she found a job listing in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* for an administrative lawyer at the Public Service Commission, today's Public Utilities Commission. She landed the position and began May 1, 1989. Although the office was based in Carson City, Waldron said her new boss encouraged her to live in Reno. "He said coming from L.A. that Carson City would be too much of a culture shock," she said. "So he even found me an apartment right down the street from his house."

In October 1992, she accepted a position as deputy district attorney in Washoe County. During her time there, she, like Dean, developed cancer and has dealt with several bouts. Seventeen years later, she faced being laid off due to budget cuts but chose retirement instead. She enjoyed being a deputy D.A., especially the security of a regular paycheck, good state benefits and a retirement plan.

At age 55 and still wanting to work, she opened her own firm, where she still practices family and employment law today. Although she enjoys being the boss, she said she has goals to meet. "Financially, I'd like to be back to where I was when I was a D.A.," she said. "I'd like to get a not guilty in an actual jury trial."

Waldron remembers when she and Howard joked that they were the northern Nevada chapter of the black bar association. Now, 22 years later, she knows of two more African-American lawyers in Reno and about 10 scattered around the area.

"To double our number is a quantum leap," she said. ■



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