

The Legacy of Judge Edward Rodgers Scholarship

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Judge Edward Rodgers was an extraordinary pioneer of civil rights, racial equality, and justice within the judicial system. Throughout his career, he made valiant contributions to his profession and community that still benefit people today. In this essay, I will discuss some of Edward Rodgers's achievements, and how his legacy continues to reverberate today.

In 1950, when Rodgers was a fresh college graduate, he moved to West Palm Beach where people of color faced heavy discrimination and had limited educational, social, professional, and financial opportunities. Despite these barriers, Rodgers fiercely challenged racial pay gaps in the public school system, led campaigns for desegregation in hospitals, and became the first black prosecutor and judge in Palm Beach in 1973.

Judge Rodgers's looked at the criminal justice system through a humanitarian lens by considering the unique identities and circumstances of each person and case. One of his most significant contributions was his relentless pursuit of racial equality within the judicial system. He recognized the inherent biases that disproportionately incriminated people of color and other minority groups, and worked to rectify them. Judge Rodgers firmly believed that justice should be blind to race, and that everyone, regardless of their background, should be treated equally under the law.

As the first black prosecutor and judge in his area, Judge Rodgers brought a new perspective to the courts from his lived experience as a black man. But his contributions to representing minority groups in the courts did not stop there. Rodgers used his platform to promote diversity of underrepresented groups within the legal profession by encouraging diverse individuals and groups to pursue legal careers. He did this through mentorship programs, advocacy, education, and inspiring others by example. He recognized the value in having diverse representation in the judicial system, as it would decrease bias and increase equitable sentencing.

This is a topic that occupies a lot of my attention and intention as I am a Licensed Bachelor of Social Work who has four years of experience working in the social work field. For my first two years after college, I worked as a Drug and Alcohol Counselor at residential and outpatient rehabilitation centers for adults. I have worked with clients of different races, backgrounds, and ages, and I have had an individual look at me and say, “You don’t have an addiction. You’ve never slept on a urine soaked mattress in an abandoned building in Baltimore with no money, no family, and nothing but a desire to get high. How could you possibly understand me?” And while I consider myself an empathetic person who seeks to understand others, I completely understand why my clients would feel a disconnect and barrier when seeking help from someone who does not share their experience. In order to have accurate representation of different kinds of people and experiences in our legal and healthcare systems, we need to have actual humans who have lived those different experiences in those roles.

Judge Rodgers was a visionary who demonstrated dedication to fairness, reformation, and ethical practices in the judicial system. Rodgers implemented programs that targeted reformation instead of punishment leading to recidivism. In 1991, Judge Rodgers started the Riviera Beach Civil Drug Court which offered an alternative to incarceration. More specifically, drug courts offer non-violent offenders who struggle with substance abuse issues an opportunity to receive treatment, develop healthy coping mechanisms, and reclaim their lives outside of a jail sentence.

As I mentioned before, I have experience working with substance abuse victims in treatment centers for addiction. I have witnessed first-hand, how drug court has given individuals a second chance at life. A common misconception of those who are not familiar with drug court, is that it offers a “slap on the wrist,” or an “easy” way out of a charge. Drug court is by no means, a light sentence or fast-track to freedom. Drug court is highly structured and requires

accountability and continued effort to meet the requirements of the program. Through drug and alcohol treatment services, interdisciplinary education, randomized drug screenings, probationary supervision, and court participation, individuals on drug court have the support to transform their lives.

Even if a person who struggles with addiction makes bad choices, their addiction alone does not make them a bad person. Abuse of alcohol and/or drugs alters the way one thinks, acts, and uses critical judgement, initiating increased risky behavior and criminal activity. Prolonged drug abuse even alters the chemistry of the brain and can make the brain and body recognize drugs as an essential need, the same as it does food. Judge Rodgers understood this and was able to make the distinction between a person and their disease of addiction. By treating addiction, you are also treating side effects of addiction which include criminal behavior. Making an investment in drug treatment court an investment in a safer society.

Judge Rodgers firmly believed in the power of the courts to enact meaningful change and used his position to advocate for justice. Through his committed activism for racial equality, representation of diverse communities, and reform for victims of substance abuse in the legal system, Rodgers' service and legacy will inspire future generations and continue to shape a more equitable society for years to come. I have appreciated this opportunity to learn about the legacy of Judge Edward Rodgers, and will channel his inspiration as I work to earn my Masters in Social Work, and continue to serve others in my social work career.