

# Denise Page Hood to Pass Chief Judge Gavel on Feb. 18

There was never any doubt that Chief U.S. District Judge Denise Page Hood was destined to achieve.

Her parents expected and encouraged it. And she embraced it.

From growing up in a predominantly black neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio, to being accepted to a prestigious high school for girls and admitted to Yale and Columbia universities, Hood excelled. She became a lawyer, practiced law, and served on the benches of city, county and federal courts, culminating in becoming Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan in 2016.

“Each day I come to work, I know that I have the potential to make a difference in someone’s life,” Hood said in 2019 after accepting the Michigan Lawyers Weekly Woman of the Year Award, one of many honors she has received over the years.

“Sometimes, it’s not the difference they want me to make,” Hood added. “Everyone is not always happy with my decisions, but I try to be as fair and impartial as I can and to think about what it might be like if I were the person appearing before me. Most of the time, I think people know that I’m trying to do the best that I can.”

On Feb. 18, 2022, Hood passed the Chief Judge’s Gavel to U.S. District Judge Sean Cox during a ceremony at the Theodore Levin U.S. Courthouse in Detroit. She will continue her duties as a federal district judge.

Colleagues said she has left her mark on the Court, leading it through completion of a complicated \$140-million modernization project, filling several key positions following retirements on the management staff, and grappling with a two-year COVID-19



pandemic that shut down the district's five courthouses for several months as the court continued to work remotely.

"With grace, kindness and patience, Chief Hood navigated the tremendous challenges presented by this pandemic," said U.S. Senior District Judge Victoria Roberts.

"Numerous competing interests have vied for her attention. She has been a steadying and guiding force and never once lost sight of the fact that ours is a court family and that we must remain functioning and cohesive for employees and the public. Her leadership is unmatched."

Denise Page was born in 1952, in Columbus, Ohio. Her parents, Richard and Nancy Page, worked at a federal military supply warehouse. They raised Hood and her younger sister, Teri, in a middle-class black neighborhood and an African Methodist Episcopal Church where the girls learned about the struggle for social justice and civil rights.

The Pages valued education and instilled their daughters with self-confidence and the determination to succeed.

"I never for one moment thought I was going to do anything except go to college and earn an advanced degree," Hood said in a recent interview.

Hood was an excellent student whose academics helped pave the way for her success.

After completing the eighth grade, she was offered a scholarship to the Columbus School for Girls, an independent college preparatory high school that was opening its doors to black students.

"I didn't want to go to an all-girl's school, and I did everything I could to sabotage the admissions interview," Hood recalled, adding that she didn't want to be separated from her public-school friends. She even threatened to run away from home.

But her parents were resolute.

"You are going to be educated there," she said her father told her. "And don't get your feelings hurt if you don't make friends. Some of the students may not want to be your friend, or perhaps their parents won't let them be your friend."

The Columbus School for Girls changed Hood's life.

She was the only black student in her class of 45 girls. She excelled at academics, made lifelong friends and was elected president of her senior class. She graduated from the school in 1970 -- the first African American to do so.

Hood's father wanted her to attend a prestigious women's university, but Hood wanted to attend a coeducational college.

Yale University recruited her from Columbus School for Girls having decided to admit women the previous year. It pledged to assist her with scholarships and financial aid.

Hood majored in psychology and African American studies and hoped to become a book editor.

During the summer of her sophomore year, Hood and other Yale students traveled to Mississippi as part of a fellowship program. Hood and another student were assigned to Port Gibson to help a newly elected black county tax assessor set up his office. It was the tail end of the turbulent Civil Rights Era, and the first time Hood experienced segregation of the Deep South.

She capped off the summer by attending the 1972 Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach, Fla., and got swept up in the excitement surrounding an effort by Shirley Chisholm of New York, the first black woman elected to Congress, in her longshot bid to become her party's presidential nominee.

During her final year at Yale, Hood planned to intern as an editor at Doubleday book publishing in New York City. But the company cancelled the program at the last minute because of an economic recession.

So, Hood changed gears and took two placement tests, hoping to get an advanced degree after receiving her bachelor's degree in 1974. She scored highest on the law school exam and was accepted by Columbia University in New York City.

Two years into her studies, she married Nicholas Hood III, the son Nicholas Hood Sr., a prominent Detroit pastor and City Councilman. The couple met while her husband was a student at the Yale Divinity School. Like his father, Nicholas Hood III became the senior pastor of Plymouth United Church of Christ and served on the Detroit City Council. They have two adult sons, Nathan and Noah.

The couple returned to Detroit so her husband could accept a position on his father's church staff. She completed her final year at the University of Michigan Law School, but her law degree is from Columbia.

"The only reason I actually became a practicing lawyer was because I came to Detroit," Hood recalled.

She landed a job at the Detroit Law Department and specialized in employment arbitration. She also was part of the legal team at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department. Her first supervisor was Anna Diggs Taylor, a role model and mentor who eventually became the first black woman appointed to the U.S. District Court for Eastern Michigan and its first black female chief judge.

Hood also got involved with the Wolverine Bar Association, Detroit Bar Association, Women Lawyers Association, Detroit NOW (National Organization of Women), and the NAACP Young Adults. Through her involvement in these groups, and the campaigns of her husband and father-in-law, Nicholas Hood Sr., she was introduced to Detroit's legal and political communities.

In 1980, while serving on a committee that interviewed candidates for judicial office, a friend suggested that Hood run for judge of the newly created 36<sup>th</sup> District Court in Detroit. Two years later, with her family's encouragement, she ran and won.

In 1988, then-Gov. James Blanchard appointed her to a vacancy on Detroit Recorder's Court.

In 1992, she was elected to a six-year term on Wayne County Circuit Court.

The next year, she became the first black woman president in the 157-year history of the Detroit Bar Association. She also has served as president of the Association of Black Judges of Michigan and vice chair of the Olivet College Board of Trustees.

"Never mind that I'm the first," Hood said at the time. "What's important is that I'm not the last."

In 1994, President Bill Clinton nominated her to U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan. The U.S. Senate confirmed her on June 15, 1994, the president signed her commission the next day and she became the first black judge to be appointed to the Eastern District bench since Taylor in 1979.

In the years that followed, Hood handled several high-profile cases.

The biggest and most complicated was the Dow Corning breast implant case.

In the mid-1990s, Dow Corning filed for bankruptcy and Hood was assigned to preside over an avalanche of nationwide lawsuits filed against the Midland-based company, resulting from the manufacture of silicone breast implants.

In 2004, following years of litigation, negotiations and appeals, the bankruptcy plan became effective. The plan provided payments to claimants from a \$2.35 billion fund, through a litigation or settlement option. Payments have been made to more than 134,800 persons who said they were harmed by the company's silicone products.

Over the years, Hood developed a reputation for her legal ability and judicial temperament. Lawyers told the Almanac of the Federal Judiciary that Hood is knowledgeable, competent and courteous.

"She is warm, engaging, and thoughtful," one lawyer wrote. "She is easy to deal with," said another.

She also has received numerous honors including the Detroit Bar Association's Chairperson of the Year Award (1988), Judicial Service Award from the Black Women Lawyers Association (1994), the D. Augustus Straker Bar Association's Trailblazer award (2014), Damon J. Keith Soul and Spirit Humanitarian Award (2016), Michigan Lawyers Weekly Woman Lawyer of the Year Award (2019), and the Detroit Bar Foundation Dennis Archer Public Service Award (2019).

Hood also has served in key national leadership posts of the United Church of Christ, which enabled her to travel on missions to Africa. In 1993, she traveled with a UCC delegation to Hawaii to formally apologize for the church's part in overthrowing the Kingdom of Hawaii in the late 1800s.

In January 2016, Hood was installed as Chief Judge and welcomed by hundreds of well-wishers who packed the Detroit courthouse for the event. By law, chief judges in the federal system are selected based on seniority and age.

As Chief Judge, Hood sets policy with the help and approval of district judges, who serve on the Court's various committees and function as the Court's board of directors. The Court Administrator and department heads, including the Chief Probation Officer and the Chief Pre-Trial Officer, work directly with the chief judge.

Besides leading the Court through a major renovation project and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, Hood had to fill vacancies caused by the retirements of several key management staffers, including former Court Administrator David Weaver, and the Court's chief pretrial and probation officers. Kinikia Essix, the Court's financial manager, was selected to replace Weaver.

She also instituted a succession planning program to encourage employees to move into leadership and convened a committee of a cross section of court management and staff to find ways to keep courthouses operating during the COVID pandemic.

Hood has an open-door policy and encourages judges and employees to offer suggestions to improve the Court. This resulted in the creation of programs to help prisoners and other Pro Se litigants navigate the legal system.

"Serving as chief judge has been an honor," Hood said. "I could not have succeeded without the support, innovation and ideas our from judges and talented staff."

U.S. District Judge Linda Parker credits Hood with navigating the challenges of leadership "with grace, humor and a commitment to inclusion of the diverse voices and perspectives of the court family. Her tenure as Chief will be remembered for her decisiveness, thoughtfulness and good cheer throughout the challenging times she encountered."

Hood said she plans to resume serving as judge without administrative duties. She eventually may opt for senior status and a reduced caseload to make time for other interests, including travel.

Asked how she would like to be remembered as a judge and Chief Judge, Hood said: "As being fair, and compassionate and empowering of court employees."

*Researched and written by David Ashenfelter, Public Information Officer of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan.*