

# Local and Special-Purpose BAR ASSOCIATIONS

## The Judge Charles A. Pratt Bar Association

### Resisting Tokenism and Answering the Call to the Community

By Alisa L. Parker

In 1935—a time when the only jobs Negroes could obtain in Kalamazoo, Michigan were as custodians, maids, chauffeurs, or hot asphalt pourers—a young and ambitious Charles Pratt returned to his hometown after graduating from Howard University Law School. He was eager to put his hard work into practice and make a name for himself as an attorney.

“I was not invited into a firm,” Pratt said in a speech at Grand Valley State University in the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> “One lawyer told me that now the colored people had a lawyer of their own. I told him that I was not a lawyer for the colored people, but for all the people. That I was a Negro but did not want to be restricted because of that fact.”<sup>2</sup>

Pratt went on to start his own solo practice, and in 1968 became Kalamazoo’s first African-American judge.

Decades after Pratt started his legal career in Kalamazoo, practitioners of color have been able to make some advances in the legal profession. However, many continue to experience challenges related to race in the areas of cultural awareness and inclusivity. There is still a need to ensure that practitioners of color are viewed as legal professionals for all people, not a mere token of representation for their particular ethnic group.

In October 2010, a group of African-American judges and lawyers representing Kalamazoo and Calhoun counties met to



Hon. Charles A. Pratt

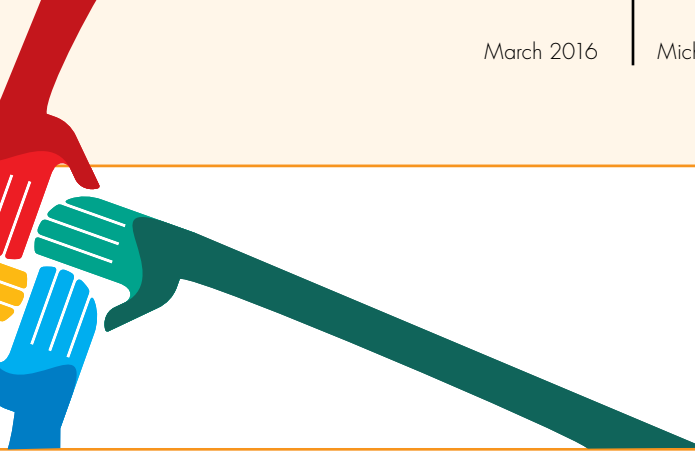
respond to the needs and challenges facing practitioners of color. These judges and lawyers sought to provide safe spaces for practitioners of color to connect, share experiences, network, mentor, and gain opportunities for professional and personal advancement. They voted to establish the Judge Charles A. Pratt Bar Association, the first minority bar association in these counties. It focused on actively promoting legal education and encouraging diversity within the legal community.

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The founding members of the Judge Charles A. Pratt Bar Association included an impressive array of legal practitioners: Hon. Curtis J. Bell, chief judge of probate, Kalamazoo County; Marla Gilreath, senior claims counsel, Nationwide Insurance; Marcia Jones, Kalamazoo assistant city attorney; James L. Liggins Jr., attorney, Miller Canfield (founding president); Hon. Alexander C. Lipsey, 9th Circuit Court, Kalamazoo County; Alisa Parker, supervising attorney, Legal Services of South Central Michigan; Dorphine



Payne, attorney, Payne Law Office; Linda Rawls, staff attorney, Legal Services of Eastern Michigan; Geoffrey Upshaw, attorney, Geoffrey Upshaw Attorney at Law; Hon. Carolyn H. Williams (retired); and Sidney B. Williams, attorney, Flynn, Thiel, Boutell & Tanis, PC.

### The Judge Charles A. Pratt Bar Association

Since its inception, the Judge Charles A. Pratt Bar Association has focused primarily on two areas: providing legal education to the Kalamazoo community and serving as a resource for aspiring and practicing attorneys of color through informal mentoring, intern and clerkship experiences, job opportunities, and networking.

One signature program is an annual Know Your Rights panel discussion. This event, held in collaboration with the Kalamazoo County Bar Association, offers members of the community the opportunity to ask questions of local attorneys, judges, and law enforcement officials on various legal topics. Past topics have included criminal and consumer law, housing, family and domestic relations, and race relations with police.

The association also sponsors the Law Challenge during the annual United Way campaign, hosts an attorney mixer for local attorneys, and provides legal information at local festivals and community events.

The association completed its strategic plan in 2014, identifying three goals: expanding community outreach, implementing a Charles A. Pratt Summer Clerkship Program, and increasing collaborative activities. In an effort to reach these goals, the association has intensified partnership efforts with various community organizations to sponsor legal education events. Association members have also mentored college students interested in legal careers



2015 Judge Charles A. Pratt Bar Association members. Back row, left to right: Hon. Curtis Bell, Hon. Alexander Lipsey, Sidney Williams, Hon. Carolyn Williams (retired), and Namita Sharma. Front row: Alisa Parker, Marcia Jones, and James Liggins Jr.

Photo by Takarra Dunning

through job shadowing, advising, and internship experiences.

### More on Judge Charles A. Pratt

Naming the area's first minority bar association after the late Judge Pratt was more than just a salute to his achievement of becoming Kalamazoo's first African-American judge; it was a call to action for the association's members to uphold the legacy for "the continual search for equal justice under the law for all people," which guided Pratt's legal career.

Pratt was born in 1909 and attended Howard University, earning an undergraduate degree in teaching. Unable to land a teaching job, he attended Howard University Law School on scholarship. Because he was not accepted into a firm, Pratt practiced law as a solo practitioner for five years before taking a leave of absence to serve as an officer in the United States Army's 366th Infantry during World War II.

Upon his return, Pratt dedicated himself to serving the greater Kalamazoo community by providing accessible and socially conscious legal services and information. He served with the Douglass Community Association, Kalamazoo YMCA, Kalamazoo Child Guidance Clinic, Family Service Center, Kalamazoo Visiting Nurses Association, Kalamazoo Goodwill Association, and Community Services Counsel. He also founded and was chairman of the Kalamazoo Legal Aid Bureau, which provides legal services to low-income residents. Additionally, he served as director of the Michigan Children's Aid Society and president of the Kalamazoo County Bar Association. In 1968, Pratt was elected to Kalamazoo County's 8th District Court, where he served until his retirement in 1980.

Pratt married Thelma Lenox and had four children: Charles Pratt Jr., a retired professor; Helen Mickens, retired dean of Thomas M. Cooley Law School; Dr. James Pratt, a retired professor; and Sonya Terburg, a private investigator.



October 2014 Pratt Bar Association meeting and discussion. Pictured, left to right: James Liggins Jr.; Yasmine Wint; E. Dorphine Payne; Richard Cherry; Hon. Carolyn Williams (retired); Alisa Parker; Sidney Williams; and Helen Mickens, daughter of Judge Charles A. Pratt (seated).

### Minority bar associations, tokenism, and a call to the community

Why is there a need for a minority bar association in 2016? As Pratt faced the issue of tokenism in 1935 when he was deemed “the colored people’s attorney,” the same issue persists today.

Recently, I attended a meeting of a newly formed group for female attorneys. They were discussing the appropriate topic for the annual Law Day. This year’s theme was “Michigan Milestones: Symbols of Freedom under the Law.” I suggested that we use the Sojourner Truth statue, known in our community as a potential symbol of freedom under the law. My presentation about centering legal education on this great figure was immediately discredited with the suggestion that I dress up as Sojourner Truth. As the discussion continued, it became clear that the group’s perception was that I, the only African-American female, was the only suitable person for the task since Sojourner Truth and I are from the same culture.

Minority bar associations provide safe spaces where issues of tokenism can be irrelevant to participation in the organization’s projects or activities. They’re also environments in which attorneys of color are supported by other practitioners who face tokenism and can share tools to navigate professional waters. Being part of a minority bar association is not a call to segregate; rather, these organizations often encourage inclusivity and make intentional

efforts to open programs and opportunities to more practitioners.

Minority bar associations can also provide education, advocacy, mentorship, and legal support for underserved and unrepresented minority communities. The recent national conversations on race—particularly in the African-American community as it relates to the policing of African Americans, dismantling of the Voting Rights Act, and policies surrounding affirmative action—all intersect with the legal community.

In his Grand Valley speech, Pratt quoted one of his college professors, who said, “Go back from whence you came and make yourself part and parcel of the community.” Pratt went on to say that, after graduating from law school, “[S]ome of the graduates went to the big cities or stayed in Washington. I remembered [my professor’s] admonition and returned to Kalamazoo, Michigan.”

Pratt’s legacy compels the Judge Charles A. Pratt Bar Association to dedicate itself to providing a voice to issues of race and inequality that still face our society. Although being an attorney of color sometimes means resisting tokenism, as Pratt did by example, we should all be ready to answer the call from our communities without diminishing our value to be an attorney for all. The practice of law is large enough to recognize and respect this distinction.

As the association continues to grow in membership and expand organizational programming, we hope to continue to collectively serve the legal community and public. To learn more about the Judge

## Judge Charles A. Pratt Bar Association

### 2015–2016 Officers

Richard Cherry, President  
E. Dorphine Payne, President-elect  
Chiante Lymon, Secretary  
Namita Sharma, Treasurer  
Alisa Parker, Immediate Past President

### 2016 Members

#### Attorney Members

Hon. Curtis Bell  
Richard Cherry  
Ean Hamilton  
Phillip Hamilton  
Reba Harrington  
Lakeysa Ivy  
Marcia Jones  
James Liggins Jr.  
Hon. Alexander Lipsey  
Alisa Parker  
E. Dorphine Payne  
Namita Sharma  
Hon. Carolyn Williams, Retired  
Sidney Williams

#### Student Members

Aderonke Ibronke  
Chiante Lymon

Charles A. Pratt Bar Association, please visit <http://www.prattbar.com> or like our Facebook page. ■



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*State Bar of Michigan since 2007 and serves on multiple state and local boards, including the State Bar Representative Assembly, District F Character and Fitness Committee, and the State Bar Diversity and Inclusion Committee.*

### ENDNOTES

1. Charles Pratt, 8th District Court Judge, address at Grand Valley State University: *A Negro’s Life in Small City before 1930; A Negro’s Life in an All Black Regiment* (1980) (on file with author).
2. *Id.*