

Cylenphia LaToye Obayan

There are lawyers that talk. There are lawyers that act. Cylenphia LaToye Obayan is undoubtedly cut from the latter cloth. Her resume reads like the *Who's Who* of volunteerism. She has donated innumerable hours promoting equality for minorities and women—tirelessly, relentlessly, assertively, and continuously.

Reginald Turner, past president of the State Bar of Michigan, nominated Obayan as a Citizen Lawyer. He has found that she “is a great lawyer, a compassionate humanitarian, and wonderful leader. She inspires people with her enthusiasm for good causes. Cylenphia never says ‘no’ when she is needed to make a project work. She has accomplished a lot at a young age and her future is limitless. I am proud to call her my friend and colleague.”

Obayan is now the director of the Detroit Workforce Development Department, a Michigan Works! Agency. Her daily work is much more than full-time, yet she continues to serve the legal profession and community in numerous ways.

Certainly some of Obayan’s commitment to the legal and general communities came from her work as a counselor at the Wayne County Crisis Line, as a specialist at the Michigan Credit Union League, and as a mediator of landlord/tenant disputes at Wayne County Neighborhood Legal Services. She had ample opportunity to see the needs of a variety of individuals.

Another impetus was the assistance she received from the Wolverine Bar Association (WBA) when she was in law school. The WBA, an affiliate chapter of the National Bar Association, was formed to support and advocate on behalf of African American attorneys during a time when they were not admitted into the Detroit and Michigan bar associations. The association continues to support African American attorneys through advocacy, training, and networking.

The Association provided Obayan with opportunities to attend its law student recep-



L-r: Brenda Motley-Aikens, Esq.; Hon. Sheila Johnson; Hon. Craig S. Strong; Cylenphia LaToye Obayan, Esq.; Rebecca Barrios; and Karen Gibbs, Esq. at the 2004 Wolverine Bar Association & Association of Black Judges of Michigan's Annual Presidents' Dinner

tions. Through the WBA, she received a law student summer clerkship and several law student scholarships. Following graduation, she immediately began to give back by joining several WBA committees, culminating in her presidency last year. Obayan will always be active in the WBA, stating: “WBA is my favorite organization because it has members who have had the most impact on my personal and professional growth for the past 13 years.” She received the 2000–2001 Member of the Year Award from then President Alison Nelson for support of Nelson’s presidency, and for the work and effort Obayan contributed to the WBA during that year.

Obayan’s WBA reputation reaches to the Michigan Court of Appeals, where she has earned praise from the Honorable Kurtis T. Wilder: “When I first met Cylenphia, I was immediately impressed with her concern that those less fortunate in society should be able to have adequate access to our legal system, and her recognition that lawyers have to lead for that access to become reality. Her career has been marked by a positive commitment to action in service to others. Her kindness and concern for others, her commitment to excellence in everything she does, and her humility are inspiring. She was an excellent pres-

ident of the Wolverine Bar Association, and I am confident that in future leadership roles she will continue to inspire others to the same commitment of service that she embodies.”

Obayan has been active at the national level since 1997. She was elected into leadership for the National Bar Association’s Women Lawyers Division in 1999, and currently serves as second vice president. She planned the division’s breakfast for its 2005 annual meeting, which required an average of 10 hours a month most of this year. In 2000, she received the Presidential Award, given by then President Harold Pope, for work on his planning team during his year as president-elect, and for assistance during his presidency.

Obayan was elected president of the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan for the 2002–2003 term. She was the first African American woman to so serve in 30 years, and only the second in the organization’s history.

Obayan is involved in many other organizations. She is a member of the Executive Committee of the Michigan Works! Association; a member of the Steering Committee of the Michigan Works! Directors Council; trustee of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Workforce Development Council;

commissioner on the Human Services Community Services Commission; and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.

She is a life member of the NAACP, for which she served as state youth chaplain at age five in Arkansas; a member since 1984 of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., the first sorority founded by African American women; and a member of the Detroit Urban League. She is also a volunteer certified general civil case mediator.

Throughout her career, Obayan has received numerous other awards and honors, including the Above and Beyond Award, Ser Metro Detroit, September 2003; Dream Makers Award, LaSed, August 2003; 2003 Distinguished Alumni Award and 2001 Dent/Murphy Trailblazer Award, Wolverine Student Bar Association; and was featured in the "Top 5 Up & Coming Lawyers," *Michigan Lawyers Weekly*, August 2001.

Prior to her position as director of the Detroit Workforce Development Department, Cylenthia was the assistant general counsel to Kwame M. Kilpatrick, Mayor of Detroit. She previously served as executive director of Kilpatrick's transition team. She has extensive experience as a labor and employment attorney in all phases of traditional litigation matters, including labor negotiations, arbitration hearings, administrative matters and cases involving breach of contract, ERISA benefits, defamation of character, and harassment and discrimination based on race, gender, age, religion, and disability.

Obayan received her Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology from Wayne State University and her Juris Doctor, cum laude, from Michigan State University—Detroit College of Law.

Obayan has managed to find time to put pen to paper for the legal profession. She co-authored "Former Drug Addicts in the Workplace, An Employer's Dilemma," *Laches*, Oakland County Bar Association, with Thomas J. Guyer; and "Sexual Harassment: Recent U.S. Supreme Court Decisions," *Labor and Employment Lawnotes*, Labor and Employment Law Section of the State Bar of Michigan, with Camille Stearns Miller.

Honorable Cynthia D. Stephens of Wayne County Circuit Court is well aware of Obayan's "can do" attitude: "When I met her, she

was an energetic and gregarious child. I have been privileged to know Cylenthia since her days as an active and able student at the Detroit College of Law. She has a 'yes' spirit. She said 'yes' to Women Lawyers Association of Michigan's need to revive slumping membership and recruit more women of color into its ranks. She said 'yes' to the Wolverine Bar Association's need to bring quality continuing legal education to its meetings, expand its scholarship fund, and broaden its community

outreach. Cylenthia continues to accept responsibilities large and small even when common sense tells her she has too much to do. Thank God that she is blessed with boundless energy to accompany her 'yes' spirit." ◆

Francine Cullari practices real estate, estate planning, and business law in Grand Blanc. She is Vice-Chairperson of the State Bar of Michigan Publications and Website Advisory Committee, where she is responsible for the Michigan Bar Journal. She is the editor of Bar Beat, a local magazine for the legal profession.

CITIZEN LAWYER

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