

Trailblazing judge also played a sweet sax





Judge Blanche Manning, shown in 1990, was the first African American woman elected to the Illinois Appellate Court. (Charles Osgood/Chicago Tribune)

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Blanche Manning died in late September without the public fanfare typically offered to trailblazers, which is why one of her fellow judges alerted me to her death the other day.

“She was a remarkable person who deserves a full obituary,” her former colleague emailed. “I think that, had she been a man, her death would have been noticed.”

Blanche Marie Manning was born in 1934 on Chicago’s South Side, daughter of a homemaker and a hotel manager. She rose to become the first African American woman elected to serve on the Illinois Appellate Court and after that to work as a federal judge.

“She was a Black female judge when we didn’t have very many Black female judges,” says Cook County Circuit Judge William Hooks. “It was a predominantly white male industry, and there was a testing process. It took a while for them to know that Blanche Manning was not the person to disrespect.”

Manning didn’t grow up dreaming of the law. She wanted to be a musician. At Fenger High School, equipped with a secondhand clarinet, she played in the orchestra and the marching band. Afterward, she attended the Chicago Musical College at Roosevelt University. But her father worried that jobs were scarce for female jazz musicians and persuaded her to be more practical.

Along her practical path, Manning held jobs as a legal secretary and a Chicago Public Schools teacher. In 1961, she enrolled in law school but dropped out when she and her husband, William “Billy” Manning, took five nieces and nephews into their home to raise as their own. Among them was Jack Porter, who was 2 when his mother died and Manning stepped into the role.

“She was a very kind and caring person who was generous with herself in all aspects of life,” Porter says. “She was a very humble person. She never went out of her way to say anything about her accomplishments.”

Eventually Manning resumed her legal studies and earned a law degree at John Marshall Law School, which she later supplemented with a master of laws from the University of Virginia School of Law. Through the years, she practiced in various realms of government, as well as the corporate world, so that by the time she reached the federal bench she knew something about almost everything.

As a federal judge, she handled a wide variety of cases, some high profile. There was the tiger killer. And the Chicago cop doubling as a kingpin for a drug-dealing street gang. Once a convicted murderer sent her a threatening letter and a bomblike device hidden in a hollow book.

“I remember her as a proponent of the news media’s First Amendment rights — always something I was on the alert for with the judges,” recalls former Tribune reporter Matt O’Connor.

Manning was known as quiet, reflective, no-nonsense, humble, perfectionist, fair, and committed to charitable causes and young people who lacked advantages. She spoke and taught widely, and took her duties as a role model seriously.

“Sometimes,” Hooks says, “I try to have the quiet and peace of Blanche and the sureness of her decisions. She would say powerful things but she didn’t raise her voice.”

That description, echoed by others, doesn’t, however, take into account the woman who whipped around in a sporty Mercedes.

“Once when I was a practicing lawyer, I saw a little Mercedes pass me on the Dan Ryan Expressway,” Hooks recalls. “I won’t say she was speeding, but she needed to get where she was going faster than me.”

Afterward he called her and said, “Judge, I know you move fast on the bench, but on the Dan Ryan you need to slow down.”

In the practice of law, Manning found the practical work her father wished for her, and with it the chance to help repair the world. But she never abandoned music. Once, when asked how she’d like to be remembered, she answered, “As a skilled jazz musician and a fair judge.”

She was a founding member of the Chicago Bar Association Symphony Orchestra, just one of several bands she founded or played in. They had names like Diversity and Scales of Justice. In 2000, she helped form the Barristers Big Band, a popular entertainment at legal and charity functions. The group rehearsed every Monday night from 5:30 to 7 in her office at the federal courthouse.

“She was a fantastic soloist,” says John Vishneski III, a lawyer in the band. He describes her playing as “light and tasteful.”

Manning’s husband died in 2004, and after her retirement in 2012, she lived out her life at their home in Olympia Fields. Until a year or so ago, she took music lessons every Wednesday morning, though arthritis cramped her style.

In late winter, around the time the pandemic started, Hooks called to ask her opinion on a conflict of interest situation involving attorneys.

“She collapsed 15 hours of legal research into a telephone discussion,” he says.

A full obituary of Manning, who died on Sept. 20 at 85, would be much longer. It would include a long list of people she touched, organizations she helped, songs she loved to play, including her signature tune “Autumn Leaves.” Suffice it for now to say: She made Chicago better.

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