

Episode 2: The Black Experience in Primarily White Institutions (PWIs) w: Judge Walker

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Keoshia Worthy (host): Welcome to *Invisible and On Stage*, a podcast series hosted to you by me, Dr. Keoshia Worthy staff psychologist at Columbia Health, Counseling and Psychological Services. Please remember that although the podcast is intended to provide support it is not a replacement for psychotherapy. If you are interested in counseling services and are a Columbia University student on Morningside campus, please contact CPS at 212-854-2878.

Worthy: Hi, and welcome back to *Invisible and On Stage*. Today's conversation will be on ways to improve the Black experience at a PWI and beyond. We are joined by Judge Monique Walker from Augusta, Georgia. [Judge Monique Walker: Hi!] [Both speakers laugh.] And in honor of Black History Month, and our guest, I think it will be educational to highlight the history of the relationship between Blacks and the justice system, which dates back to 1708.

Worthy: During that time, lawmakers in Pennsylvania developed a reentry rehabilitation system. The goal of this system was to reduce crime and recidivism. In 1787, began the Wheelbarrow Men laws which comprised of mostly incarcerated European males. All convicts, except murderers were contracted out and put to public labor. The goal was to induce shame and reduce criminality.

Worthy: After the emancipation and reconstruction era, between 1865-1898, there was an increase in crime, which African American males seem to have dominated. The Wheelbarrow Men laws quickly diminished, and labor was no longer, “soft”, but harsh and brutal. Lawmakers coerced African American males to comply with labor demands and social order through criminalization and incarceration. At that time, many southern states poured millions of dollars into this system. Many African American men worked until their death with the average lifespan of 31 years and were never compensated for their contribution. As a result of this system, African American men are seen as criminals and inhumane, rather than a victim of racial and systemic oppression. Judge Walker, if I could turn it over to you, I'm wondering how much of this abusive relationship with the judicial system influenced your career decision making as a Black woman?

Judge Monique Walker: This relationship had a lot to do with my career decision making, I have always known that I was interested in helping people so it didn't start out so much about the African American journey or response to the African American experience, particularly that what you just described, but it ended up that way. So I knew I wanted to be an attorney. And I can find some places and notes that say I wanted to be a judge, but never in my wildest dreams did I realize how severe the situation would be at this present time, this present age, and so seeing the plight of other people, seeing

the plight of relatives to be quite honest, the plight of friends, the plight of neighbors, and the plight of our culture across state and country lines, encouraged me for sure to run, to take this role so that I could be an agent of change.

Worthy: Monique Walker is currently serving her first term as a Richmond County State Court Judge. Yes, Judge Walker is from my second hometown Augusta, Georgia. So I'm also happy to have you here. She attended the University of Georgia where she earned her Bachelor of Business Administration in 1993 and received her Juris Doctorate from the University of Georgia School of Law in 1996. Monique has over 20 years of legal and managerial experience in both the public and private sectors involving criminal and civil matters. She is also the proud founder of her own law firm, Walker Hill and Associates, LLC. So should I call you, Monique? I know you're friends with my mom and that's how... you know, we talk about networking, right? Should I call you Monique? Judge Walker, what works best? Soror?

Walker: Whatever you're most comfortable with. We are connected in various ways, through the sisterhood, by role or personal, whatever you're comfortable with.

Worthy: Have you ever experienced any injustice when you were in college?

Walker: In college, I went to a predominantly white institution. And there was nothing that I can recall that was directly impacting or designed to disenfranchise me as an individual. But certainly, there were lots of programs and opportunities in place that I think that were designed for students with other cultures and backgrounds, where African American students did not get to participate, I can tell you that for sure.

Worthy: Do you mind sharing some of those examples?

Walker: Scholarship, dorm opportunities, I was in the dorm with no air conditioning [laughs] and those kinds of things. And I didn't even realize, maybe I missed it. But on the other side, it was very few African Americans. I think those dorms may have been cost prohibitive for African American students, but I can't say with any degree of certainty. I also think, opportunities when your parents are legacies in a place—my parents were not of course—and so there were opportunities in that networking, and that dog, bulldog family life [referring to the University of Georgia's mascot] that people just naturally inherited. Because you know, it's not a system. I think it wasn't as designed and disenfranchised, but rather to enhance another group of people. So there was this long standing tradition, if you will, that were not in any way, positively impactful for me.

Worthy: Were you active in any way on campus as a college student?

Walker: Oh my goodness, yes! [Worthy: laughs.] As a college student, I volunteered, I was in the Student Alumni Association where I earned the student award of the year, I was Top 10 among Greek African Americans, and all the Greeks, not just Panhellenic councils. [Worthy: Oh wow!] Not just the Top 10 among Greeks, I was on the homecoming court. I was president of my sorority for two years, where I got lots of accolades, Dean's list, Honor Society. There were several volunteer organizations, Black Law Students Association, and then the community organizations, as well as leadership UGA, those are things that I can readily recall, and then I did some mentoring.

Worthy: How did you balance, you know, being involved in all of those extracurriculars while still being a student?

Walker: Work first. [Worthy: Work first.] You do your work first. It is a very fine balance. I think some people it comes naturally. But I have two daughters now and one of them she does it without my assistance. And the other one, I do all the balancing for her. So I think it's a good lesson to learn early. And certainly to incorporate that you have to get your work done first. And then everything else will follow. If you're not doing the work, you're not going to be on the Dean's List, you're not going to be invited to the Honor Society.

Worthy: Do you think it is...because I know when I was in college, I was an athlete. And so I didn't get an opportunity to participate in probably any extracurriculars. But, like, I pledged Delta, which, you know, Monique and I are a part of, Delta Sigma Theta sorority [chuckles]. But other than that, I wasn't a part of anything and I remember graduating and I had some regret about that. And what do you what did you find to be rewarding about being a part of other organizations and other things that were on campus?

Walker: Well, I'll say that service is what I'm made of, that's what I do. I've just enjoyed it, I did it in high school. So I think the most valuable of the things that I gained from my engagement and participation was a lasting relationship, both personally and open the doors professionally. I think as athletes, or non-athletes, such as myself, we have to decide what's best for you, what's important. If you get a scholarship to run track, you better run [chuckles] and run fast, but I'm not athletic so that was not an option for me. But you have to find a way to do what's best for you, and you're not gonna always get it right on the first try. So, no real regrets, but I have some relationships primarily from my sorority, for sure, my college roommate, and then a few other friends for whom I am in constant contact. And then of course, I can always call school and talk to some other individuals who can be helpful as mentors and those things. So, no, no regrets, no sports, but I think you may have missed moving outside of your bubble. But I don't know that would have done anything for your career because you seem to be so self-motivated. [Worthy: Yes.] [Both speakers laugh.]

Worthy: It took me a while to be more open to networking in having...like I remember always saying to myself, "Oh, I hate those short conversations with people when you have to meet them." I always cringe.

Walker: I was just gonna say I was in my late 40s, when I fully understood the value of networking. And I encourage you and all of the college students listening, start today. Every relationship has a meaning, some more significant than others. But [referring to what others may say] “Oh I want to do it on my own, I don't need any help.” Well, good for you. But it's always good to know people, to know what they're doing...people share ideas, people share suggestions that could make you a millionaire overnight, that could improve your health, that can enhance your family. And quite frankly, put a smile on your face or de-stress you. And the opposite can happen too. But I'm just saying I find people to be valuable, for so many reasons. Now will I do people all day? No. But I do enjoy and appreciate the value that people bring in my life, personally, and here at work.

Worthy: I think you're right about that. I'm actually starting to see the value in that. And I always encourage students. I think, at least the students at Columbia, which is a PWI and you went to, you attended a PWI. Some of the questions that I hear from Black students is feeling alone, like maybe being the only Black student or maybe not connecting with other Black students or trying to figure out like, Where are they? Do we have these things in common? I'm wondering for you, how did you manage to connect with other people who look like you?

Walker: Well, I can tell you that as early as high school, I've been one of a few African American students. So, I can recall to this day in high school being only one of two. My high school, was predominantly white at the time. And in the upper level courses they were maybe...I was the only African American in my AP English class, I remember that. I never read those books. But anyway. So when I got to Georgia, it wasn't that much of a surprise. So instead of being in the small classroom, we would be in a classroom of 200 people, literally, they have auditorium style classrooms. And you could just see people spread out, you know, like little sprinkles of pepper. And I think sometimes we would gravitate toward one another, we did have, like an African American Student Association. People tend to gather in dorms, but I could tell you that nobody comes looking for you. And so, you know, we're in the student center, and places where people hang out, you just kind of find your way in your niche in your group. And sometimes it's possible for some people and for some people not so much. But while I was associated with lots of African American people, I also had friends who were not, but it just worked out, I just go with the flow. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Worthy: We've talked about me being self-motivated. But it also sounds like you were a social butterfly, like you weren't afraid to get to know people?

Walker: Well, some more than others, afraid not necessarily. But I had my standard crew. And again, this person I just talked to, and I get another text every Wednesday, it's called “Wednesday Weigh-in,” and it goes to all of the roommates. And so I just chatted with those same girls from 1989 this morning, and so those relationships have remained intact. And then you know, our friends have friends. So one of them was in a different sorority. So for those people in my major, you know, you study or do projects

that people you feel like you have something in common with, you go to the cafeteria, and you migrate towards that table. So I'm not a psychologist, but you know, sometimes we have to bring ourselves along. I'm encouraging my children to do the same thing.

Worthy: But I think that's one of the things you said earlier was about getting out of your comfort zone.

Walker: And I can say that much better than I can do it.

Worthy: You've been practicing. Right? [Walker: Yes.] And it sounds like you are now instilling it into your children as well. You were the former Assistant District Attorney, and you worked with several or probably multiple misdemeanor and juvenile cases. What was that like? Sometimes we experience vicarious traumatization at least I do in my work sometimes, balancing my own mental health when I'm hearing about traumatic, you know, my clients' traumatic experiences.

Walker: You know, I think my...so here again, I was the only African American female at the District Attorney's office when I started working there, and I think it was one guy [referring to an African American male] in terms of lawyers. And so I think my trauma, if there was any would have resulted from the culture there, but I didn't experience...I think I have more eye-opening events. The first case I ever trialed was a child molestation. And so that was a tough case, but I had no qualms about prosecuting it because that's what it demanded and I'm very sensitive as it relates to children. And so I had no qualms. And, as an Assistant District attorney, the prosecutor cases, the criminal cases are the most are more egregious, more heinous than those that are misdemeanor court where I am currently seeing rape, and murders, and those kinds of things. And so they almost become routine, maybe a bit of broad word, but you become accustomed, because that is the nature of the work. But the culture was something different.

Worthy: I mean if you can, share just some of the challenges with the culture because I think, like, as you mentioned, you know, you can be able to manage the work, but I think our...who we work with, and what the rules are, the established rules, and whatever the system is in place could be trauma, or traumatic in itself.

Walker: And I don't even think they are real rules, I think they are biases. So I can recall, two things I can recall when I...for me, it was being educated and taught how to properly try a case and everything that comes with it. Like who's training who and the second thing was about communication, and inclusion. And so I can vividly recall, being in the courthouse preparing to try my first case, with no help picking the jury and I was nervous as they come for that child molestation case, but down the hall were several of my colleagues in another courtroom all piled up for one case, and they were all...they were not new prosecutors. But one guy, who happened to be a white guy came and sat with me and picked the jury. And he wasn't the odd man out, but he was the one that, he was not highly favored and so I appreciate that until this very day. A second instance, I recall, I heard people talking around, moving

around the office about some training, but what it turned out to be was our continuing education programs, and it was out of town. And everybody was making plans and they had hotel rooms and those things and I thought, oh, what are we doing? And so I went to the DA at the time, who is now a judge here. And I said to him, "What's going on? Are we supposed to be registering for this conference?" And he was like, "Yeah." And I was like, "When is it?" And he told me and I just cried in his office, because everybody else was registered, knew where they were going, and talking about their roommates, made travel plans. And I literally went to this conference, had my mother to ride with me, to, I think, Jekyll Island, and just made my way throughout the whole conference by myself, and came back. And I don't remember a thing about the conference, but everybody else knew about it. I never forgot it. And I didn't stay long either.

Worthy: Sounds like you weren't, like, as you mentioned, you weren't included or supported in that space. [Walker: Correct, correct!] What do you recommend for students who may feel that way? Like in classes or on campus? What would be your recommendations for them? Should they speak out, because, you know, maybe going to another college may not be the option for them?

Walker: I think that those kinds of decisions have to be made on a case-by-case basis. The impact on me may be different from the way somebody else has been impacted. I think students who come from predominately white schools into predominantly white colleges may be better suited, you know, to move through that community. Some who don't, you know, may have a different experience and vice versa. But, I do think that in 2021, and as African Americans in particular, we don't spend enough time dealing with our mental health issues. So the first thing you have to do to evaluate your circumstances and in my mind, determine class wise. Now, do you need other groups and social groups? Of course we do. So you should accept some responsibility and making sure that you are affiliated with groups and organizations who can support you, and also seek out help and counseling. If you don't feel good about it, let's find a way to get comfortable with our surroundings, let's get comfortable with our environment because college is our home for at least a period of four years. And so, anytime you're spending more time being uncomfortable, and questioning yourself and your own values and those kinds of things. I think it's time to evaluate and immediately seek help and guidance and make your decision based upon your own set of goals and your mental health.

Worthy: How do you take care of your mental health? Because I think that is great advice.

Walker: You know what? I have a counselor. I don't see my counselor as much because of COVID. Matter of fact I haven't seen him at all. I wish I could go because of COVID. But when I need to, I have open and honest conversation. It took me a long time, but I'm not playing any more games with my mental health. If I'm feeling stressed, I, as the old folks used to say, "I go and sit down," I walk away, I relax. I deal with people all day, at work, in the courtroom, my colleagues, my social organizations, I'm a member of a gazillion of them, with Zooming here, and doing this. But when I go home, I want to be at home. And sometimes people are upset about it, but I can't, you know, you call me up after hours

about something legal or to ask me questions. Or if someone asks, “Can I give this person your number to call and to ask you a question.” I will say, can you ask them to call my office tomorrow, unless it's an emergency, of course, but sometimes other people's emergencies are just that in their mind. But being part of the system, I know that it's not as critical, but it's not, you know, I can't tell you that your situation is not emergent to you. But I can tell you if it's not emergent to me. So I can, you know, and I'll do my best to help whomever whenever, however, what I tried to do, but when I'm at home, I'm at home. You know, take off the judge's cap, the lawyer thinking and be a mom, you know, and a day is never finished in that regard. But I do see a counselor, I pay to go and sometimes drive an extended distance. And I'm sharing that to say, it's worth every minute, and every dime, if you could find yourself in a place where as he told me, that you can get over yourself and your own insecurities, it's for yourself. So that's why I am and you don't have to wait too late to do it.

Worthy: And I appreciate you for sharing it because I think there's so much stigma in the Black community regarding mental health treatment. And so hearing someone in your status say you go to a therapist, and you know, you recognize the importance of it, I really appreciate you for sharing that.

Walker: One of my best friends who is a psychologist goes as well. I asked her, “Who's your counselor?” and so I called her counselor. She does the same thing. And so I think the more educated you are, and the more you understand how important it is to be able to maintain... We get this life one time and so in order to keep the train on the track at this fast pace that we live, sometimes we have to put the brakes on and hop off the train, and get a little help so we can have energy, to get back on and keep going towards our destination.

Worthy: What does it mean for you to have a Black woman in the White House, to be our VP?

Walker: Yeah, I think that's amazing. I think it's awesome. I think it is eye-opening and certainly opens the door for other females, not just females or African American females, all females, all girls, to be able to dream big [Worthy: Yes.] and know that this is a real possibility. I hope that it also brings with it a sense of pride, a sense of responsibility, a sense of I must do certain things so that I can achieve these goals. If I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do, if I'm not learning proper manners or etiquette, if I don't dress appropriately, you're never gonna get to the next level to do these things. I hope it will start to encourage all of us to want to do and be better and to strive reach higher heights but I'm tickled pink and excited and delighted.

Worthy: So before we transition into our “Flash from the Past” segment in honor of Black History Month and considering our guest Judge Walker, I'd like to recognize our first black female judge in the US. Jane Matilda Bolin. Judge Boleyn was born April 11, 1909, and died at the age of 98 on January 8, 2007, so she was the first of many, the first black woman to graduate from Yale Law School, the first to join the New York City Law Department and the first black woman to serve as a judge. She was sworn into the bench of the New York City domestic relations court in 1939. Judge Walker was also the first—

she was the first African American female to serve as staff attorney and Deputy Compliance Officer for University Health Care System.

“Flash from the Past.” This is a segment of the podcast where the listeners can learn more about you outside of your profession. I would like for you to embrace your younger college self and think about your preferences at that time.

All right, Judge Walker, did you prefer exams or essays?

Walker: I'll give you the answer that my first management teacher gave us, it is situationally based. That means it depends. But, I would, if I had to choose probably essays.

Worthy: Individual or group projects?

Walker: Individual.

Worthy: Study ahead or cram?

Walker: Cram for sure.

Worthy: Books or movies?

Walker: Class books?

Worthy: [Laughs] If you want to interpret as that, yes.

Walker: Movies.

Worthy: Night owl or early bird?

Walker: Early bird caught the worm.

Worthy: Follower or leader?

Walker: Leader.

Worthy: On time or late?

Walker: Barely on time. [Worthy: laughs.]

Worthy: Front or back of class?

Walker: Back or middle, never front.

Worthy: Did you go out on Friday nights or stayed in?

Walker: Stayed in or came home. Sometimes out, but not too much.

Worthy: Michael Jackson or Prince?

Walker: Michael Jackson.

Worthy: *The Cosby Show* or *Good Times*?

Walker: Oh my goodness, *Good Times*.

Worthy: Jet or Ebony magazine?

Walker: Jet, because it's quicker to read. [Both speakers laugh.]

Worthy: Alright, so now I want you to think about what you would tell your college self. I'm going to start a sentence and I want you to finish.

Worthy: Prepare for...

Walker: the worst.

Worthy: Don't allow yourself to...

Walker: be distracted.

Worthy: Good, well, thank you for that! [Both speakers laugh.]

Worthy: We've reached our closing for today's episode with Judge Walker. And before we end, I think it would be necessary to highlight some of the tips that Judge Walker mentioned to help you with navigating a PWI as a Black student, as well as, you know, I'll also offer some tips as well. So I'll first start off with highlighting some of the experiences that students report at PWIs which include, but are not limited to, feeling excluded, unsupported, marginalized, and feeling like an impostor. When these experiences are combined with intergenerational trauma it can lead to further isolation, questioning one's identity, poor self-esteem, and a poor academic and/or career experience. Furthermore, the emotions tied to these lamentable encounters can impact one's psychological and physical health.

While some of us are resilient, others are not. And because of that, it is important to get out of your comfort zone. Judge Walker noted that she navigated her PWI by having community with both Black and non-Black students, being active on campus, and recognizing her purpose in college, which was to work. I challenge you to do the same.

And it's not entirely about creating or joining a community, maybe start with strengthening the one you already have. I know it's harder to do during COVID, but schedule Zoom coffee dates or go on a socially distanced walk with a friend or classmate. Starting something new is hard for all of us, but the outcome of feeling more connected definitely outweighs the feeling of isolation.

Lastly, I think many people fail to recognize the connection of our mental and physical health. We as Blacks, are already at a high risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, etc., and imagine what our body experiences when we are under a lot of stress and/or dealing with unresolved traumas.

Judge Walker acknowledged the significance of therapy in her own life and although therapy may not solve all of your problems, it can be a start to help you make sense of where to begin and even how to get out of your comfort zone. Therapy provides an opportunity to manage stress, heal, and can be another protective factor that extends our lives.

Worthy: Thank you so much for being a part of this Judge Walker. I'm sure I'll be hearing about you through my mom still. [Both laugh.]

Walker: I love her. Thank you so much for having me. And we're so proud of you and I look forward to seeing you and meeting you in person when you come back to Augusta.

Worthy: Thank you so much for offering up your time and spending it with me. If you are a Columbia University student on Morningside campus, and today's episode left you feeling like you could benefit from talking more about this topic with an expert, please do not hesitate to call CPS at 212-854-2878.