

Who is Judge Blackshear and Why Does NCBJ Have a Fellowship Named After Him?

Born in 1939 in Sanford, Florida, Judge Blackshear attended Jones High School. Upon his graduation in 1957, he moved to New York City where he held various jobs such as a mail clerk for the U.S. Postal Service, shipping clerk, and pushing dress racks in the garment district. Judge Blackshear enlisted into the U.S. Navy in 1959. Following his honorable discharge from the Navy, he began his work as a member of the New York City Police Department (“NYPD”). Concurrent to his NYPD career, Judge Blackshear attended John Jay College of Criminal Justice, graduating *cum laude* in 1971, and subsequently Fordham Law School graduating in 1977. During both his undergraduate and law school years, Blackshear was regularly promoted into higher positions in the NYPD and is rumored to have been an undercover officer for the intelligence division. During his time at Fordham Law School, Blackshear was known for his dedication to expanding diversity through his participation in the Black Law Students Association, where he served as both a member and President, pushing the development and participation of programs to increase diversity retention of minority students at Fordham Law School.

Two years after graduating from Fordham Law School, and after 16 years of serving in the NYPD, Judge Blackshear was appointed Assistant U.S. Trustee for the Southern District of New York. In 1983, four years after this appointment, he became the first African American to be appointed U.S. Trustee by Attorney General William French Smith, who at that time stated that Judge Blackshear “was responsible for the supervision of some of the largest cases before the bankruptcy court. He received substantial recognition for his achievement of rebuilding an understated office, which was suffering from low-morale while, simultaneously, supervising the exceptionally complex Johns-Manville chapter 11 reorganization proceedings.” On November 25, 1985, the next incredible appointment happened for Judge Blackshear when he was appointed as a U.S. Bankruptcy Judge for the Southern District of New York where he would serve on the bench until 2005.

During his stellar career, Judge Blackshear received many awards including: Special Achievement Award from the Department of Justice (1980); Ruth Whitehead Whaley Award from the Black Law Students Association at Fordham Law School (1981); Executive Office of the United States Trustee’s Award (1985); National Organization of Black Law Enforcement

Executives New York Chapter's Lloyd George Sealy Award (1986); John Jay College of Criminal Justice Alumnus of the Year Award (1987); Dean's Medal of Recognition from Fordham Law School (1988); and was recognized at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice Fourth Annual Lloyd G. Sealy African Americans in the Judicial System Lecture (1990). In October 1990, he received an award from the Macon B. Allen Black Bar Association; in May 2002, he received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor; and in June 2003, he received the New York Institute of Credit's Leadership in Education Award. Judge Blackshear was also honored during a special awards dinner and ceremony by the National Bar Association Bankruptcy Law Section in 2004. In 2017, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Black Law Students Association at Fordham Law School.

Judge Blackshear lectured on criminal justice at many colleges and law schools and often shared his knowledge of bankruptcy at various seminars. He served as an adjunct professor at City University of New York Law School as well as New York City Technical College, where he would annually serve as a moot court judge. He also instructed the Bankruptcy Clerk's Office on bankruptcy and participated in numerous discussions relating to bankruptcy law. Judge Blackshear developed the draft manual, which became a model, for Chapter 7 Administration for the United States Trustee Program. As a dedicated Alumnus, Blackshear served as a member of Fordham Law School's Advisory Committee on Minority Affairs, a member of the Board of Directors for Fordham Law Alumni Association, chairman of the Scholarship Committee for the Macon B. Allen Black Bar Association, writer for the Board of Contributors of The Bankruptcy Strategist, contributing author to Bankruptcy Practice and Strategy and was appointed by Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist to the Committee on Court Security for The Judicial Conference in the United States. In 2001, he was appointed to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts' Bankruptcy Judges Advisory Group. Judge Blackshear was also well-known for some of the high-profile cases he presided over including the bankruptcies of PanAm, Alexanders Department Stores, singer LaToya Jackson, McCrory Corp., and the individual Chapter 11 case of Eli Jacobs, the majority owner of the Baltimore Orioles. Although Judge Blackshear retired from the bench in 2005, he served as senior counsel at the firm formerly known as LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae before he officially retired in late 2006.

While his career was incredibly fulfilling, Judge Blackshear understood the importance of balance between his professional life and his personal one, and he relished in the love and support given to him by his wife, the former Betty Dennis, and his five sons, Adam, Michael, Gregory, Kevin, and Edjuan.

In June of 2021, Matthew Diller, Dean of Fordham Law School, shared these words on Judge Blackshear in the wake of his passing: “Cornelius Blackshear’s life was one of service – to our city through his work on the police force, to our nation through his service on the bench, and to our school, where he was a leader among our alumni and a champion of diversity...” Our new colleague, Bankruptcy Judge Craig T. Goldblatt (D. Del.) had the honor of appearing frequently before Judge Blackshear during the *Iridium* case, which was Judge Goldblatt’s first major chapter 11 case to work on as a young associate where his firm represented the debtor. Judge Goldblatt reflects: “While I do not believe I ever interacted with Judge Blackshear other than appearing in his courtroom, he was the kind of judge whose true self was plainly evident from his demeanor on the bench and his always courteous treatment of counsel”. Additionally, another new colleague, Bankruptcy Judge Tiiara Patton (N.D. Ohio), who had the honor to serve as one of Judge Blackshear’s law clerks, had this to say about him: “He was one of the smartest and kindest people I have known. I learned so much about the law but also about being a great attorney from Judge Blackshear. He was a shining example of how you can see humanity in everyone, from a consumer debtor to a corporate officer appearing before him; and whether they agreed with his decision, they felt seen. That was Judge Blackshear’s objective and is now my objective as I sit on the bench”.

On March 16, 2009, a Proclamation was entered naming the NCBJ minority fellowship program “The Honorable Cornelius Blackshear Presidential Fellowship Program”. As one of the first Black Bankruptcy Judges in the country the program was named in his honor. Judge Blackshear set a brilliant example through his work on the U.S. Bankruptcy Court bench by his renowned scholarship and development of bankruptcy jurisprudence. The Blackshear Presidential Fellowship Program works to highlight the professional achievements of minority attorneys. Since its start in 2005, after being created through the efforts of C. Ray Mullins (N.D. Ga., Ret.) and Jeff Hopkins (S.D. Ohio), the program selects around five bankruptcy lawyers to attend the NCBJ’s Annual Meeting. The candidates must have between two to ten years of legal

experience and devote a minimum of 50% of their practice to bankruptcy. In addition, candidates must also demonstrate their legal excellence in their practice of bankruptcy law; display a serious commitment to principles of civility, ethics, and professionalism; and demonstrate commitment to the continued educational development of bankruptcy professionals and to professional activities that will benefit the public, members of the bar, and the court system. Blackshear Presidential Fellows receive a stipend to attend the annual meeting, along with a copy of the Proclamation that was dedicated to Judge Cornelius Blackshear.

Since 2005, there have been 70 Blackshear Presidential Fellows selected, with three of them becoming bankruptcy judges: Hon. Charles Walker (M.D. Tenn.), Hon. Tiiara Patton (N.D. Ohio) and Hon. Magdalena Reyes Bordeaux (C.D. Ca.). Additionally, there are seven Blackshear Alums who have also been selected for the NCBJ's Next Gen Program and twelve Blackshear Alums who have been named 40 Under 40 by the American Bankruptcy Institute, including three who are both Next Gen Alum and 40 Under 40 Alum. The NCBJ stated at the time of the Proclamation in 2009 and continues to anticipate that NCBJ Blackshear Presidential Fellows will continue to leave an extraordinary and illustrious legacy as inspired by Judge Blackshear, who "dedicated himself to the betterment of the legal and judicial system throughout his career."

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