

IN MEMORIAM

TRIBUTE TO LYNN WALKER HUNTLEY '70

*Richard W. Roberts**
*with contributions by Robert D. Dinerstein***

There were no lawyers in my family. We had never sued or been sued. I barely knew any lawyers' names. I enrolled at Columbia Law School sight unseen. When I entered in 1975, though, the name I heard fast and often was Lynn Walker, Class of 1970. She was the first black woman ever on the *Columbia Law Review*. Could any of us rise to that gold standard? It was energizing to strive to her standards of excellence. But she was still then the stuff of somewhat mythical legend.

I started my very first job after law school in the Honors Program at the Justice Department. *When, what to my wandering eyes should appear, right down the hall in an office so near, the first black woman to be Section Chief, in the Civil Rights Division we held so dear.*

Lynn Walker, in the flesh, in person, in real life, in three dimensions. It was then that I knew awe. A razor sharp mind, prolific writer, legal strategist extraordinaire, whiz of an administrator. But I kid you not: Lynn could get joyous and belt out the lyrics from the latest releases from Marvin Gaye or Earth, Wind & Fire, swooning with the best of us. She could also get pensive and recite from memory the classical poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, like:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?¹

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1. Countee Cullen, *Heritage*, in *Color* 36, 36 (1925) (emphasis omitted).

It was captivating. She transported the listener to distant thoughts. It was not until we parted cities that I realized she was quoting from the famed writer and poet Countee Cullen. What an embarrassment to me since it was my own father who was recruited from his post as an English professor at North Carolina A&T to take over Cullen's poetry classes at Frederick Douglass Junior High School 139 in Harlem after Cullen's early death. I cannot recall for sure, but I hope I drew that connection for her at some point later when I got the nerve to overcome my own shame.

There was no Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act (CRIPA)² when I joined Justice. The negotiations over getting one and what it should cover were intense. The resistance on the Hill to yet more federal government overreach reminded one of lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification. But those, breathing the firebrand urgency of now, brooked no acceptance of anything short of the absolute. She showed effective leadership. She knew how to deploy arguments when squeezed between civil rights absolutists and civil rights opponents. She knew how to get results. But you met with Lynn and you had better be prepared, not purely doctrinaire. I can imagine her saying to the opponents, "Do you want to negotiate with Stokely and Bobby Seale, or do you want to negotiate with me?" To the hard core, I'd guess it would come out, "Do you want a bill or do you want nothing? Would you rather have us step forward or keep our broken feet locked in cement?" But there was no question about where her heart was. She wanted as much as we could get. CRIPA became law in 1980 and bears Lynn's pen strokes and persuasion all over it.

I'm not the only witness to the force of her intellect, personality, and good judgment. Bob Dinerstein arrived the year before I did. He saw Lynn, new to the Department, integrate with grace and aplomb the different cultures and approaches of two offices newly merged into one section, but she could certainly be tough and demanding when that was called for. He enjoyed how supportive she was of the line attorneys and how she gave them room to operate while providing guidance (or correction) when needed. Bob recalls her supervising the team that litigated the massive prison case of *Ruiz v. Estelle*³ that threatened to swallow the whole section. He walked into Lynn's office many times to talk about something only to have the conversation turn quickly to some issue in *Ruiz* that she had to resolve. Resolve it she did, with a steady hand still gripping the rudder.

Lynn was a great one for inserting a personal touch into the office atmosphere. Bob spent much of his time in 1979 in Alabama conducting discovery in the landmark right-to-treatment and right-to-habilitation

2. Pub. L. No. 96-247, 94 Stat. 349 (1980) (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. §§ 1997-1997j (2012)).

3. 688 F.2d 266 (5th Cir. 1982).

case of *Wyatt v. Ireland*.⁴ A very powerful hurricane hit Mobile, named “Hurricane Bob.” Lynn got a newspaper clipping about how “Hurricane Bob” was ravaging Alabama, and gave it to him with her note attached proclaiming that the true hurricane was his presence in the state for the U.S. Department of Justice. He treasures a “To whom it may concern” letter of recommendation she volunteered to write for him to make it easier to have references for his future efforts.

Lynn’s professionalism was apparent in all she did, perhaps never more so than after her promotion to deputy assistant attorney general before she had to work under a new administration that did not share the agenda to which she had dedicated herself for advancing civil rights enforcement. Yet she kept many of her complaints to herself, worked internally to salvage what she could, and eventually, of course, went on to do great things at the Ford Foundation and elsewhere. She provided a model for how to manage a painful professional transition in a way that preserves one’s dignity and core beliefs while continuing to perform one’s job.

We lost her far too soon, but her accomplishments will outlive us all.

4. Civ. A. No. 3195-N, 1979 WL 48253 (M.D. Ala. Oct. 25, 1979).