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## The Fifth Annual TWITA Awards: Recognizing Excellence in the Profession

TWITA, you may recall, is the acronym for, “That’s What I’m Talking About,” and the TWITA Awards are given annually to individuals and institutions that have exemplified the best of our profession and have served with honor the bar, the public, and the law.

By **Marc Garfinkle** | April 12, 2021



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Welcome back, dear reader. It is time for the Fifth Annual TWITA Awards. TWITA, you may recall, is the acronym for, “That’s What I’m Talking About,” and the TWITA Awards are given annually to individuals and institutions that have exemplified the best of our profession and have served with honor the bar, the public, and the law.

While this year’s slate of honorees is more diverse than in previous years, this is no NBA make-up call. This year’s TWITA Award winners are exceptional. As we have often done, we will honor two individuals and an institution. The individuals are New Jersey Supreme Court Associate Justice Fabiana Pierre-Louis and U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris. The institution is Supreme Court Associate Justice Jaynee LaVecchia.

It is of little consequence that all three have names overburdened with vowels. Most importantly, they all have remote connections to this writer that have unduly influenced the Committee's decision in their favor. This is not a problem.

Kamala Harris is a younger alumna of my alma mater, Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. She is also Vice-President of the United States. Her rise to greatness is now well-known, and her urban legend is growing. It will become epic as she levels her gun sights on poverty, injustice, health care, crime and violence.

More important to the TWITA judges, however, is that Ms. Harris is a close friend of Esta Soler, my lifelong activist cousin who founded Futures Without Violence. Esta assures me that the real Kamala Harris is even more impressive than her legend. That's good enough for a TWITA in my book. Congratulations, Madam Vice-President. Rock the boat!

Closer to home resides the institution. Justice Jaynee LaVecchia is a home-grown public-service phenom, born in Paterson. A stellar alumna of Douglass College and Rutgers Law, she was in the avant-garde of female attorneys who earned alpha-male law jobs and crushed it. Justice LaVecchia has served the public with exceptional energy and skill her entire career. According to an internet source of questionable integrity, that service began in the Office of Counsel under Governor Kean, in which she rose to Deputy Chief Counsel, then to the Office of Administrative Law, becoming Director and Chief Administrative Law Judge. *Dayenu?* (Yid. trans: That's not enough?) She then became Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Banking and Insurance, usually a terminal position, but she didn't stop there. For the past 21 years, she has been an Associate Justice of the highest order on our outstanding state Supreme Court.

Justice LaVecchia gets this TWITA because this observer, throughout his life, has been influenced by women of petite stature who have had exceptional intelligence, ability, compassion and character, and there has never been an award for that until now. Thank you for your service, Justice LaVecchia. Godspeed.

This writer's connection to Justice Fabiana Pierre-Louis is less attenuated. In the mid-1980s, my solo general practice had been serving, inter alia, the Caribbean, Latino and African immigrant communities in several northern counties. A Haitian friend, the late Rony Daniel, with whom I usually spoke French, was troubled that there were numerous Creole-speaking doctors in New Jersey, but not a single lawyer who spoke Creole. Most Haitian immigrants did not speak French, and access to jurisprudence was difficult for them. Rony made it his mission to introduce me to people who would ultimately "Haitianize" me. Before long, I was saturated with opportunities to learn the Haitian language, and I absorbed what I could about Haitian history, struggles, proverbs, food and drink, art and music, and much more. Haitian-Americans shared with me their religious faiths, their home lives, their values, their fears, their prejudices and their aspirations, and I worked to deserve their trust. Linguistic bonds are strong, and in short order I lost my whiteness in that community.

As I gained fluency, mine became a familiar face at fund-raisers, public events, protests and social gatherings. I was frequently in Haitian stores and homes and neighborhoods. Eventually, I hosted several social-benefit cable TV and radio programs, becoming "the Haitian lawyer" to many thousands. My life has been enriched immeasurably by my years in that world.

In the spring of 1990, political events in Haiti resulted in the overthrow of the Duvalier machine, and on a sunny April 20, in an unprecedented demonstration of unity, 50,000 Haitian-Americans from the entire Eastern Seaboard left their posts as taxi drivers, CNAs, LPNs, shop owners, doctors, artists, professionals, celebrities, clerics, teachers and students, and—with children in tow—marched across the Brooklyn Bridge in solidarity with the popular uprising known as "Lavalas" (the swallowing). I was among them, carrying in my arms the baby daughter of a restaurant-owner named Innocent. It was said that we rocked that bridge. In that crowd, I later learned, were the parents of Fabiana Pierre-Louis.

In 1994, two Haitian-born men, educated in the U.S., became New Jersey attorneys. Hundreds more men and women followed. I ceded my privileged role in their community, gratified to see the upward progress of the Haitian Diaspora in America.

Flash forward. In the latter part 2019, no longer serving a “civilian” clientele and less involved in my Haitian world, I was hoping to create a “30-years-later” retrospective celebration of “20 Avril ‘90” to take place on April 20, 2020. Not only was I hoping to round up some of the surviving New Jersey organizers and media personalities, but I wanted to connect the Haitian generations to each other. To this end, I was determined to have an Executive Committee of amazing Haitian lawyers to showcase the strides of the last 30 years. Due diligence done, I sought out an entrepreneurial young attorney named Roosevelt Jean, whom I had been following from afar, and a big-law whirlwind named Fabiana Pierre-Louis, whose resume of superlatives will not fit on this page. Both graciously agreed to work with me when the time came. COVID-19 arrived first, and it looked like no celebration was to be.

While there was no retrospective, cause for a bigger celebration ensued. In 2020, attorney Fabiana Pierre-Louis, the proud daughter of hard-working, bridge-rocking Haitian immigrants, was sworn in as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of New Jersey! That success has special meaning for many people. It has a wonderful sweetness for the Nominating Committee. Because of her trajectory, it was decided to award Justice Pierre-Louis the first ever “Excelsior” version of the TWITA. We regret that the resin statuette is being held up by supply-chain irregularities in China and Arkansas.

I am getting choked up. Now, probably for the last time, I will raise my voice on behalf of a generation of Haitian-Americans that now has children and grandchildren who speak English.

Justice Pierre-Louis Fabiana: Congratulations. More than ever, our state needs all your ability and our nation needs your example. You can never know how many communities and individuals take pride in your success. Please work hard as always, trust your instinct, and remember, Justice, a piece of this award belongs to your parents. *Pa blié koté ou soti.*

That’s what I’m talking about. See you next year.

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