

Chancellor Denise Owens to receive Susie Blue Buchanan Award

June 29, 2016

Hinds County Chancellor Denise Owens will be honored for her work as a trailblazer for other women lawyers.

Judge Owens is the 2016 recipient of the Susie Blue Buchanan Award. The annual award presented by the Mississippi Bar's Women in the Profession Committee honors an outstanding woman lawyer who has achieved professional excellence and has actively paved the way to success for other women lawyers. The award is named for Susie Blue Buchanan, who a century ago became the first woman lawyer admitted to practice before the Mississippi Supreme Court. The award will be presented during the Price-Prather Luncheon during the Mississippi Bar Convention in Destin, Fla, on July 14.

When Judge Owens was elected to the Hinds County Chancery bench in 1989, she and Judge Patricia Wise became the first African American female chancellors in the state.

Judge Owens said, "It is truly an honor to be awarded the Susie Blue Buchanan Award. When I started practicing law, I was mindful of the great responsibility inherent in practicing law, but also the great responsibility of being a role model as an African American female attorney. As a role model I hope to encourage young women to pursue their dream of being an attorney."

"Nobody deserves it more than she does," attorney Rodger Wilder of Gulfport said of Judge Owens' selection for the award. Wilder, a former Mississippi Bar president, and Judge Owens are co-chairs of the Access to Justice Commission. Judge Owens during 10 years of service as Commission co-chair helped guide its organization, formulation of recommendations which have been implemented by the Supreme Court, and its continuing work to make the courts accessible to all people. She is stepping down as co-chair in July, but will remain a member of the Commission.

"My overall goal as an attorney and judge is to improve the judicial system for both the litigants and attorneys. Most of my time is dedicated to providing better access to the judicial system and to providing educational and experience to young girls and women who want to pursue law as a career," Judge Owens said.

Judge Owens has worked to improve access to justice since she was a law school student at George Washington University. She worked for two years as a law clerk at a Washington, D.C., Legal Services elderly law clinic. Her first job after she was admitted to the Bar in 1979 was as a staff attorney for the former Central Mississippi Legal Services in Jackson.



She serves as pre-law program adviser and adjunct professor at Tougaloo College. She helped organize the Black Law Student Association and annual mock trial competitions for the Magnolia Bar Association. She has taught paralegal technology for many years at Hinds Community College.

During her entire legal career, she has worked to increase diversity on the bench and bar by promoting interest in careers in law. Judge Owens and her colleagues organized a law camp to reach girls ages 12-15 to not only encourage them to pursue law as a career but to increase their self esteem and awareness. Since 2005, she has worked with the National Association of Women Judges to present The Color of Justice, an annual program which introduces young female middle school students to careers as lawyers and judges. She is one of the sponsors of the Tougaloo Pre Law Society, which reaches out to college age students. She also has helped sponsor legal education programs for law students and young attorneys.

“As a member of the National Association of Women Judges, I have maintained an alliance with other women judges to promote women in the judiciary and to address issues impacting women and the judicial system, from encouraging women to enter the legal profession to seeking ways to advocate for prison reform focused on incarcerated women and the impact of incarceration on their children,” Judge Owens said.

“Each day in court, I preside over cases ranging from child custody to property disputes, business matters, divorces and matters of equity. The cases I handle reflect the fabric of life in this country, with rich and diverse cultures. Judges, unlike members of the other branches of government, stand apart from political and partisan ideas. We must ensure that each litigant receives a fair and impartial hearing with results based upon the law. That is the foundation of the public’s trust and confidence in the courts, in which I take great pride,” Judge Owens said.

Judge Owens served on the Task Force on Gender Fairness, and the Gender Fairness Advisory Study Committee. “Our goal was to study and address the perceived effects of gender bias in the judicial system and to educate the bench, bar and public about gender fairness,” she said.

She has served in leadership roles on the bench, holding every office except treasurer of the Conference of Chancery Judges. She became secretary of the Conference of Chancery Judges in 1996, vice-chair and program chairperson in 1998, and chair in 2000. She served as conference chair for two years.