

# The Mercury News

## Former South Bay foster child pays it forward as family court judge

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Fatimat Reid made history last November when she became a family court judge, making her the first woman of color ever elected to a countywide seat in Monroe County, New York. But her personal history began in Milpitas—as a foster child struggling to find stability in an overloaded system.

Half of all children in foster care have faced four or more traumatic experiences like abuse, parental drug use or neglect, and Reid was no exception. As a child in foster care, she was shuffled between seven different homes. It wasn't until she met her Court Appointed Special Advocate, Erica Yew, that she found a place for herself.

The nationwide CASA program trains volunteers to serve as advocates and voices for children in foster care and the court dependency system. Reid was 12 years old when she met Yew, now a Santa Clara County Superior Court judge.

Reid has “been a miracle her whole life,” Yew said. “It’s so rare for kids who are dependents in the foster care system to graduate from high school, much less college, much less law school, much less become a judge.”



Reid, who was born in New York, spent her early childhood in Nigeria before moving to Milpitas. Yew says Reid was always an excellent student, despite being removed from her home for abuse and neglect. The two formed a close bond, going to the movies and on shopping trips. And Yew, a practicing attorney, would occasionally take Reid to the courthouse with her.

Reid eventually returned to New York to attend college, unsure of her path. At the end of her undergraduate career, she took the LSAT and the MCAT and did well on both. In the end, her experiences with foster care and Yew's guidance helped her make the tough decision. “I had always loved going to court to watch (Yew), but I was always nervous about public speaking,” Reid said. “I didn't feel polished or that people would care what I had to say, but (Yew) would always tell me I had a lot to share. I never thought I'd be the one standing in court.”

She settled in Rochester after meeting her now-husband while in law school. She worked as the attorney for the Rochester City School District for a few years before

being promoted to chief of staff for the district. Working directly with the families, Reid said, broadened her horizons and reconnected her with her past.

“It took me back to the time when I was in foster care,” Reid said. “People are facing the same challenges I faced, plus new ones in light of the economy and everything going on nationally.”

When two seats opened up on the family court bench in Monroe County, Reid’s family and Yew supported her desire to run. She wanted to be a representative on the bench with actual experience in the community she would be making decisions about.

But as a black woman and a Democrat, she was up against a powerful machine.

Historically in Monroe County, Republican candidates reliably took countywide judicial seats, and only one person of color in history had successfully won the countywide position. Everyone from the powerful political players in the county to other people of color who had tried and failed to clinch a seat told Reid it was a losing battle.

But Reid was undeterred. She ran a grassroots campaign, attempting to show people her authentic self and share her story. She went door to door, telling people about herself, how she “worked my butt off ... and went through the foster care system.” And her history resonated with voters.

“This wasn’t a career move,” Reid said. “This is something I felt passionately about. I wanted to let people all over the county know that the color of my skin should not be a barrier to access for a judicial seat.”

Now as a judge arbitrating family and custody cases, Reid is in a position to make decisions that will affect the children in situations similar to her own childhood. She says the social welfare system is full of well-intentioned but overwhelmed workers, and programs like CASA that prioritize the child’s welfare and point of view are immeasurably important.

Santa Clara County has about 1,500 minors in the court dependency system, and Child Advocates of Silicon Valley is regularly recruiting and training new CASA volunteers to meet their needs. According to Laura Fulda, director of community development for Child Advocates of Silicon Valley, last year 98 percent of high school seniors in the CASA program obtained high school diplomas, compared to less than 50 percent of foster youth nationwide.

“Just having one positive adult in a foster child’s life during those turbulent times can change the trajectory of their future,” Reid said.

Reid visited the South Bay last year during her campaign for a fundraiser. She was almost moved to tears when she met with the head of the CASA program, who told her she and Yew had done something remarkable, that they were a success story for foster children and their advocates.

Reid replied, “it can happen for everyone.”