

## Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Eighth JD Executive Tasha Moore

John Caher: Welcome to a Veterans Day episode of Diversity Dialogues, a production of the New York State Unified Court System's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. I'm John Caher, host of the Court Systems Amici podcast series.

Today, we are going to explore leadership, service and camaraderie from the perspective of a woman who followed an unlikely path to become an Army medic, treating Wounded Warriors during Operation Desert Storm, and then an equally unlikely path to become the first Black woman ever to serve as Deputy District Executive and now district executive in the Eighth Judicial District.

Tasha Moore will tell us about her experiences in the military and discuss how she happened to make history standing on the shoulders of a few pioneering judges in Western New York in her adopted city of Buffalo.

Tasha, thank you for joining us. Since this is a Veterans Day feature, although a little bit late, let's start with your military career if we could. How, when and why did you end up in the Army?

Tasha Moore: That's actually a funny story. So a friend of mine who was in the Air Force told a very, very young Tasha to join the Air Force and somehow by the time I got to the recruiter, I ended up where the recruiter wanted me to be, which was in the Army. I tested very high. I could have gone to any area that I wanted to go to, but apparently there was a need for Army medics. I had no interest in medicine, no interest in being a medic. I've always known I wanted to be a lawyer and I can honestly sit here and tell you that I don't regret it. I still have no interest in medicine, but with the knowledge that I gained and the people that I met, the training that I received, I don't regret it at all.

What the recruiter got was a very young, immature young lady who heard him say, "You get a \$2,000 signing bonus," and didn't read anything—my first lesson in not being a lawyer who wanted to be a lawyer! I didn't realize that that \$2,000 signing bonus would be paid in installments over a period of time. All I heard was 2000 and thought I would put a down payment on a car. None of that happened, and even with that life lesson that I learned, and a negative, it was still a life lesson that if I went back and did it all again, I would not be the person that I am now today without the mistakes that I've made. Even thinking back on the mud that I've crawled through in basic training and the runs that I went on and all the other things that I went through, all of them shape me into the human being that I am. So I'm okay with it.

John Caher: You mentioned some of the lessons you learned specifically being a medic and the people you encountered and the things you saw. Do you want to talk about some of the things that you saw and dealt with during Desert Storm, a 1990 operation where the United States led a coalition in Iraq?

Tasha Moore: What they did with us is half of us went to Iraq and the other half covered the regular Army that went over. So I was sent to Walter Reed and the half of us who were stateside were supposed to switch out with the other half who were sent to Iraq.

What I saw in Walter Reed were our soldiers who were hurt when they came back. Those are stories I don't really talk about. I consider those stories to be those individual's stories and some of them are quite painful. Some of those are stories of success and people overcoming things, and some of those are stories of people who did not. I also worked other wards in Walter Reed of some of our soldiers who were older and simply had injuries or were overcoming health issues. And some of those stories are stories of triumph, and some of those are stories of life being lost with dignity. It's a lot.

But it was a wonderful experience with regard to just my own personal growth. When you work in that type of environment, you learn a lot about yourself, your colleagues, how to give, how to learn, and you learn a lot about yourself, about your community. Because we were a large unit, I was pen-palling with my friends who were overseas, what they were dealing with and what we came back to. I will say that when we came back, the stories that you see when you return home, they're not all Hallmark moments. Some were, some weren't, but it was a life lesson that I don't regret.

John Caher: So your time was all in the states, you weren't in Iraq during doing this?

Tasha Moore: I was not because when we came back, the war ended right about the time that we would've done the shift overseas, so I did not do any time overseas.

John Caher: What did you learn about leadership in the Army?

Tasha Moore: I was very lucky to have very good leaders when I was in the military, particularly when I was with the larger units. I was in a very small unit in Florida, but my Illinois unit and my reserve units were very large units, so they were more. Anybody whose ever watched the old episodes of MASH, most of the field units I was with were very large like that. So

teamwork, how to put up a field hospital, take down a field hospital, that took strong leadership. And I remember one of my sergeants used to say, "Head turns the body but a head without a body is useless." And I remember at the time, because that particular sergeant liked to bark, but in a good way, I would hear that person but I didn't understand what that meant until I led. And the same sergeant had a lot of little sayings that, at the time I didn't get, but I got them after they were said. He would often tell me, "You got to follow, follow! you learn by following. You'll be me when you can follow." In time, I understood that by watching and learning from those that led.

One of the things that one of my leaders would say, "Pay attention to the good leaders, pay attention to the bad ones. You'll learn from both of us," and it all mattered. I have seen excellent leadership, I've seen mediocre leadership and I've seen poor leadership, and there was a lesson in all of it and following with intelligence is what one of my sergeants said and one of my lieutenants. It mattered and all of those things helped me, but I think the one that stood out for me the most was "the head turns the body" because as I sit in the position that I have now, no matter how intelligent or how smart I am when I walk in this door in the morning, if I come in and I bring the staff down, they're down for the rest of the day. They don't operate well if I'm not projecting well and they control this place. I am nothing without them and I think that's important to remember.

John Caher: That's very, very interesting because I stumbled on something last night, a couple things, and I'll share the other one with you in a moment, and this was a 1949 U.S. Army pamphlet, "Personal Conduct for Soldiers," with a foreword by General Omar Bradley. And in a section on the courteous leader, he writes, "Most great leaders are kind and courteous. The leader who treats his people badly will find that his people behave badly. A courteous attitude toward all races, nationalities and religious faiths helps a person get along with people." It sounds like you try to incorporate exactly the qualities that Omar Bradley was talking about in your position with the Eighth Judicial District.

Tasha Moore: I do. I absolutely do. I can have a bad day, but they don't need to know that. It does no one any good to know that. That's my business. I keep it to myself, get myself together and move forward, drive on.

John Caher: On the other hand, as a leader when they have a bad day, you kind of do need to know about it, don't you?

Tasha Moore: I do because I need to address it and find out whether or not it's systemic or just them.

John Caher: I'm going to read you one other thing. This is a little jarring. It was the official conclusions of the Army War College Report on Negro Manpower issued in 1925, and what it says is:

*"The American Negro has not progressed as far as other subspecies of the human family. The cranial activity of a Negro is smaller than whites. The psychology of a Negro, based on heredity derived from mediocre African ancestors cultivated by generations of slavery, is one from which we could not expect to draw leadership material. In general, the Negro is jolly, docile, tractable and lively, but with harsh or unkind treatment can become stubborn, sullen and unruly. In physical courage, he falls well back of whites. He is most susceptible to crowd psychology. He cannot control himself in fear. He is a rank coward in the dark."*

Now that's 1925. Could you reflect on that in your experience in the military?

Tasha Moore: I didn't see that at all. My first two drill sergeants were two strong, intelligent Black men in charge of a group of women who challenged us from day one to excel and do well, who encouraged us when we were not doing well by expecting us to do well. They did not allow us to wallow in failure. They did not overly reward us when we did well because the expectation was that you were going to. They presented us with opportunities to succeed. They challenged us when we did succeed, because you could do better. So I did not see anything at all that reflected anything in that statement that was designed to demoralize and destroy.

John Caher: That is wonderful to hear that we've obviously come a long way since 1925-

Tasha Moore: Yes we have.

John Caher: ... as I would hope that we have. As I would hope that we had.

Tasha Moore: Most of the units that I went to were filled with strong people of color in my military experience. In fact, the only time that I did run into true challenges with regard to my ethnicity was when I was assigned to a unit in the south and I was the first Black person in that unit. I know that because the person who "welcomed" me to the unit called me the N-

word and told me that they were a card carrying member of the Klan and showed me their membership card.

John Caher: Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. What year are we talking about here?

Tasha Moore: We are talking about in the '80s, the late '80s, early '90s.

John Caher: 1980s, right?

Tasha Moore: Yeah...

John Caher: Not 1880s. You're not that old.

Tasha Moore: No, and that was in Florida. When met with those challenges, I just looked at the individual and informed them what my name was and what it was not. told them that if they continue to behave in that way, I knew exactly where the HR office was and what I would do to take care of my own mental health. And the irony is that move forward about three or four years and that individual and I had a positive relationship, not because I dealt with their foolishness, but because I did not. So it's still very much a part of life in some places, but you don't have to be afraid of it. You just simply address it, but you don't have to address it with fear. You don't have to address it with anger. But you do address it.

John Caher: Wait a minute, I want to unpack that a little bit. You ended up becoming very friendly with this person. How did that happen?

Tasha Moore: I wouldn't say very friendly.

John Caher: It became cordial?

Tasha Moore: It was funny. The person adjusted to me more than I adjusted to them. I ignored them and moved on and after some time, the unit itself integrated and the individual, by the time that I was ready to leave that unit, said to me, "You've made me think differently about people that look like you." And I said, "Well, that's good to hear. I'm glad you feel differently." And we talked about it and we moved on. But it wasn't because I made any concerted effort to do so. I just simply didn't put up with the foolishness. I didn't do so by being mean or evil or responding in kind. I just demanded respect and I gave it back once it was given.

John Caher: And did your job.

Tasha Moore: Exactly.

John Caher:

I'm relieved to hear that your experience was ultimately positive.

Offline, you mentioned your father-in-law and Colin Powell, both of whom served in Vietnam, and that was only 10, 12, 15 years after the armed services were integrated. What stories did you hear from your father-in-law about that era when the armed services were still in the process of integrating, of welcoming Blacks?

Tasha Moore:

My father-in-law did not talk about stories from his time in Vietnam. These are not stories that he shared. What he did share was the importance of education. What he instilled in us was how important it was for him to go to school. What he modeled for us and for his sons, rather, was how important education was. He came home to Florida where he was born and raised and where his family was and found it difficult to find a job. So he went to school. Florida A&M is a historically Black college. He married my mother-in-law. He had young babies and he went to school and he was very much invested in getting a degree to take care of his family. And halfway through his education process, he was sent back to Vietnam. He often talked about the challenge of having to go back to Vietnam, care for his family.

But he did not allow that to deter him from continuing his education. He used that as a platform to make sure that his sons understood that it was important to complete what you start and to not to just get a baseline bachelor's degree, but to go ahead and get the higher degree so that no one could ever tell you that what you could not do. to make sure that you had the necessary education to get rid of all ceilings. So both of his sons have master's degrees at a minimum, and we were very proud of him for that.

And just as Colin Powell set the ceiling high for all of us and showed us all that there was nothing we couldn't achieve by becoming a general in the military, by setting so many firsts for our communities, my father-in-law set boundaries as high as he could for our family. So we were very pleased with that.

I look at my friend base, I look at my girlfriends who I was in the military with. Lisa Johnson is a senior master sergeant in the Air Force. She is Dade County's first journeywoman as an electrician.

She's gone to school to become a general contractor as an electrician. I'm so proud of her. I once had the experience where she and I sat at a fountain and we're watching one of those fountains where music goes to it and the water jumps at certain times and it's really beautiful and we're

just sitting there to see each other, watching it happen in this big beautiful hotel. And she leaned in real soft to me and she said, "I did that." Lisa has done work at stadiums and at power plants and she's fantastic. And then another good friend of ours at home coming last year, we walk up to her, we hug her. Michelle leans in, she goes, "Guess what? I'm an Air Force colonel now."

Just beautiful moments where you can't get excited enough for a person. And I told Michelle, I was like, "How come you didn't tell me? I wanted to be there." But I was like, "Then when they make you that general, you let me know. I don't care where I am, what I'm doing. I want to be in the stands. I want to celebrate you." These are the type of stories that need to be told and shared. There are no boundaries that you cannot overcome if you are willing to put in the work and get the education. And that's the message my father-in-law shared.

John Caher: It sounds like lessons that they learned from the military and the experiences they endured in what was not exactly an equal military probably formed their view of their work ethic, their view of education, their demand for equality.

Tasha Moore: That is absolutely correct. Their view of education was that with the more education you have, the less opportunity people have to tell you no. You need to have the credentials that take care of the opportunity. Then you put in the work, you have to put in the work no matter what, but having the education and the credentials could remove those boundaries. Everybody doesn't want to do college, and that's okay, but my father-in-law would say, "Do something." I remember him at family gatherings. You always have the young cousin, the young person who says, "Well, Uncle Willie, I don't want..." —that's what we called him, Uncle Willie— "I don't want to go to college." "Okay, fine. What do you want to do? Fine. But you have to do something education-wise to pursue that craft, that goal to make sure that you can get what you need so that someone cannot say, 'Well, you can't do this because you don't have that.' And he would always encourage young people to take a look at what do you want to do and how do you get there?"

John Caher: That reminds me of something you said about what you learned in the military, that you were always pushed to do better. You were expected to do well and you were congratulated on doing very well, but it was never enough, in a good way. It was, you can do better, you can do more, you can push harder, you can achieve more. It seems like that is the lesson that your father-in-law brought back and the lesson that he instilled in his children, and a little bit on his daughter-in-law.

Tasha Moore: He did. I come from a family full of law enforcement people. My mother is a Chicago police officer. My uncle is a Chicago police officer. My grandfather was a sergeant on the Chicago Police force. So I come from a family that pushed education on my side as well. My uncles were both in the Korean War. So I have been surrounded by people who pushed excellence wherever it may come from.

But since we were talking about veterans, the veterans that are on both sides of the family, I have to admit most of them did not really talk about their experiences in their wars. I mean, the one most likely to do it with me would've been my Uncle Lonnie and he shared, but the things that he shared I consider intensely personal and I don't share. Those were very special conversations between he and I.

John Caher: Well, I'm also going to note that when I asked you to share your experience at Walter Reed, you wouldn't do so either. So I guess we're all even.

Tasha Moore: Yeah, perhaps that's a learned behavior.

John Caher: Now to back up a little bit, I believe you grew up in Chicago, is that right?

Tasha Moore: Yeah, born and raised.

John Caher: So how'd you end up in Buffalo?

Tasha Moore: I married a man from Cleveland, Ohio. I met him in college. I went to college in Florida because it was warm. I left Chicago. I was tired of being cold. And I met him there and he agreed that we would stay someplace warm and every time we moved, it got colder and colder. We left Florida, ended up in Ohio, we left Ohio, we ended up in Buffalo because he was in pharmaceutical sales. And once we got to Buffalo, I said to him, "All that's left is Canada, so we might as well admit that we are not going to anyplace warm." I liked Buffalo, liked the family life while we were young. Our first child was barely a year old. My second child was born here. This is my home. So this has been the home of my adulthood and it's a great community and I love being here.

John Caher: It was a home of my childhood and I agree. It is a great community.

Why did you enroll in law school? You mentioned that you kind of always wanted to be a lawyer, even though you became a medic. How did you end up in law school?

Tasha Moore: My grandmother, she was a steward for the post office. When my sister and I were children, she used to tell us stories about advocating for her colleagues and she would share her own disappointment of not being able to pursue her dream of being a lawyer. She never said, "You should be a lawyer." She never said, "You should be in law school." But she would tell her stories with such enthusiasm and such joy that I started talking about being a lawyer and wanting to be a lawyer. In fact, one of my cousins has a poetry book where he had all the kids write a story and I wrote a story about one day being a lawyer. I'd actually forgotten about it.

And so she passed. But when I got to Buffalo, I was a housewife all of one year and I lost my mind because I was bored out of my mind. I love my kid, don't get me wrong, but I needed something to do. And my husband goes, "Well, there's a law school here, why don't you go?" And I was like, "You know what? I will." And I did get in and I got into a school in Ohio, but I didn't want to break my family up. So I went to UB and I have never regretted it — wonderful law school, wonderful opportunity, and I've always been grateful for it. So I was a non-traditional student in law school.

John Caher: And so how did you end up in the courts?

Tasha Moore: Actually, I've always been with the state. I was very, very pragmatic and strategic about what I was going to do for my career because I was a parent and with my husband being in pharmaceutical sales, he traveled a lot. So I had to have a job where one of us was sort of nine to five. So I actually ended up at the New York State Division of Human Rights because the hours were regular and I could be there for my son when my husband was traveling and about throughout the state; he had a large territory. I was the regional director there for a few years. I've kind of noticed I tend to have a seven-to-eight-year cycle, and I was looking around for the next thing to mentally stimulate myself. And this position at the courts became available as the deputy. And so I applied for the deputy district executive position and was very humbled to get it. And I've been here now since 2016 and very grateful to have it.

John Caher: I am hearing a continuing theme. Your stories keep coming back to “no regrets” —something happened you really weren't planning on, but you're kind of glad it happened. Is that the story of your life?

Tasha Moore: Pretty much, yes. Often, when I have the opportunity to speak to students, I will tell them that every job has its good days and bad days,

but if you're doing something you genuinely enjoy, there are no truly bad days and I genuinely enjoy what I do.

John Caher: So in 2016, you become Deputy District Executive for the Eighth Judicial District, as you mentioned, the first Black person ever to hold that position in an eight-county region that stretches from Chautauqua Lake on the Pennsylvania border to Niagara Falls on the Canadian border to the Allegheny Mountains, to Lake Ontario. This is a big area. One year ago, you made history as a first district executive in Western New York. Offline you told me about some pioneering judges in Buffalo like Wilbur Trammell, Samuel Green, Rose Sconiers who helped blaze your trail. How did those pioneers help make your career possible?

Tasha Moore: So this is a very conservative area, and what they did was they opened the doors that myself and others have walked through.

You can't talk about that group without adding Court of Appeals Judge Shirley Troutman to it. You've also got Judge Montour, the first Native American judge on the Fourth Department. Each one of those people, long before I ever became a part of this community, began that civil rights movement to make it easier for people like me to be even considered for the position that I now sit in, to be taken for the value that we bring versus the color of our skin, for that to be less, I'm not going to say not held against us because you got to be a realist, but for people to say, "This person," versus, "This Black person can do this job." I mean, Administrative Judge Carter is the first Black Administrative Judge, and he would rather have me just say "the Administrative Judge." He wouldn't care about his race.

They are the people who dealt with the most in-your-face racism and harsh critique so that I could sit in this seat and do my job. So every community has the Judge Trammells, the Judge Greens, the Justice Sconiers, and right now the Judge Troutmans and Montours. And then you have your Latino community moving forward. Judge Calvo-Torres is out there. It all matters. It all builds. And every one of us has someone who has come behind us of all races, who has made it easier for us to get where we're going. And it is due to their hard work, their sacrifice, their willingness to lift as you climb. There are so many judges around here who have just said, "There's something you should apply for. There's something you should do. Here's a job you should apply for."

Judge Jeanette Ogden is very strong about saying, "Look out for this person, help out that person." I think what's very important as we do these things, is that we look at: Is this a good fit for this person? Are they

able to do this job? It's not enough to want a person to do a position, but to put the person in a position that they are able to do and do well. And lifting as you climb is extremely important.

John Caher: So you've had some historic role models throughout your career as we've just discussed. What about mentors?

Tasha Moore: Judge Ogden has been one of my mentors. I've been very lucky to have her, as have quite a few people in the Buffalo area. I think she's been the mentor for most of the attorneys who have graduated from law school. She was mentored by Judge Green. He mentored her and she is one of those people who truly believes in "lift as you climb." And she modeled it and she expects everyone who comes behind her to model it and has no problem picking up the phone, telling you, "I need you to help someone." And that is something we have all learned and understand and love about her.

John Caher: I also see kind of a passing of the baton from generation to generation. The people you mentioned, Judges Trammell and Green really go back to the 1960s, Judge Sconiers the seventies and thereafter, Judge Troutman maybe a little bit after that. Judge Carter maybe a little bit after that. There seems to be a passing of a baton. What obligations do you feel to future generations as a history maker yourself to move that baton forward?

Tasha Moore: I feel a great obligation to do so. It's very important that to the best of my ability, that I make myself available to anyone who wants to speak to me, who I'm able to assist in moving forward, to the youth who come after us. I find that lately, I haven't been able to get out of this seat much, but I think that as I get things set up with regard to the court system, with regard to my staff, the changes that we need to make with regard to what we're doing internally, that I have not been out as much as I like to. Prior to this, I used to be out a lot more at the law school and other places.

In the past couple of years, mostly due to the fact of having to do more than one job, there's a lot less of that now. I have not been able to get out as much, and I quite frankly miss it. The outreach portion of this job has always been one of my favorite things because getting out, lifting as you climb is very to me. Having a presence at the law school, having a presence in the community is very important. So while I haven't been able to get out, I have to make sure that my staff and my colleagues get out. And when I can, I have students come in and speak to me. So to your

point, it is a majorly important thing that I do and that I enable others to do.

John Caher: Now you and Judge Carter are responsible for a very, very diverse district. You've got Buffalo, the second largest city in the state. You've got the Southern Tier with a number of Native American reservations; you mentioned Judge Montour. You've got Attica State Prison. What sort of challenges come with the geographic and demographic diversity?

Tasha Moore: It is not so much a challenge as it is a reality. I just spoke about me getting out, delegating. We have a lot of untapped talent throughout our district. It can't just all be one person. We have so many good people, energetic people, people who want to reach out, share their knowledge, have the ability to share their knowledge, have the desire to do so, and the desire to educate our community and to make sure that they know what's happening. So one of the things that we're doing is we're reaching out to our staff and we're saying to them, "Who are you? Tell us who you are. Tell us what you bring to the table." And we're creating what's called an ambassador program so that as we learn who they are, we can then deploy them to share that with the communities that they're in and enable them to be an asset where they are, and then we can go out with them and be a greater part of our distant communities.

Allegheny is particularly challenging because it's extremely spread out and rural. Chautauqua is an area where we have a lot of people who come in from foreign countries. We have to make sure that we address how new communities are coming up in areas where they didn't use to be. Dunkirk has a lot of people coming in from other countries and you're having a larger Hispanic community. That's a new area for Dunkirk. So we are trying to reach out to that community out there. We're seeing a Bosnian community come in here into Erie. We've got different ethnicities that we've never had before.

All of this is increasing our diversity in a good way, but we also need to serve these communities and we need to learn them and address them and have them learn us. So it's an opportunity, and with the Ambassador program, there's an opportunity for us to create a richer, diverse staff and then have that staff help us learn our communities. So that is something that we are actively working on and using to make sure that we reach everyone and everyone knows that they have access to our court system.

John Caher: That's interesting. I suspect, depending on which way your window faces, you can look out your window and see Canada. And historically, a lot of

immigrants, including my own ancestors, came here through Canada. So I imagine you're seeing a fair amount of that coming over the Peace Bridge.

Tasha Moore: Now that they've opened back up, yes. We do have a lot of people coming in from Canada. We have a lot of people coming in from the asylee countries. I think it's exciting and interesting times here. We are doing a lot of outreach for languages. The challenges for that is that when you have for the Canadians, you don't have the trauma issues because it's Canada, that's our brother/ sister country. But when we have the asylees come in, we have the added issue that these are people who are usually coming in from countries where they have had a lot of traumatic issues going on.

So helping them cross not only the barrier of moving into our area from another country—they're coming in from countries where they're war torn and they have the added concerns of not just, "Will you interpret for us?" They have other issues behind that. There's other things that are going on there. So it's challenging, but in a good way. And it's a challenge that we're taking very serious and it's a welcome challenge is what I think I'd like to say.

John Caher: "Welcome challenge." I'm glad to hear you say that, but that also seems to be a theme in your life, welcoming challenges.

Tasha Moore: It is. Yes.

John Caher: Tasha, I want to thank you for your service. both to the nation and to the courts, and thank you for coming on the Amici program.

Tasha Moore: Thank you for having me, John.