

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Esther Louis-Juste

John Caher: Welcome to a Diversity Dialogues episode of Amici, the podcast program of the New York State Unified Court System. I'm John Caher.

Today we are joined by Esther Louis-Juste, a woman of Haitian roots who serves as Justice Coordinator for the Ninth Judicial District, which includes five counties in the lower Hudson region: Dutchess, Orange, Putnam, Rockland and Westchester.

We'll be talking to Esther about the work of the Justice Coordinator and about her family's experiences as immigrants. And along the line, I hope we all learn something about the Caribbean nation of Haiti.

Esther, thank you for coming on the program. So you were born in the United States, so you are automatically American, but your parents *chose* to be Americans. They *wanted* to be Americans. When, why and how did they make that transition?

Esther Louis-Juste: Hi, John. Thank you so much for having me today. I am looking forward to this conversation.

So yes, my parents *chose* to be Americans. They came here in the 1980s. My mother originally wanted to study abroad and her goal was to go to Canada. However, she felt like the United States had a little bit more to offer, so she chose to come to New York instead of going to Canada with her brother. My father was here on the visitor's visa, coming to see his siblings. He wanted to see his brothers, who were here in New York. And he ended up just staying. It wasn't his original goal to stay, but he stayed and he's been here ever since.

And so they both came here for better opportunities. Of course, Haiti is home for them, but they knew for a fact that the United States had a little bit more to offer them.

John Caher: So did they meet in Haiti or over here?

Esther Louis-Juste: My parents actually met in Haiti. They met at church. They were actually really, really close friends, and they stayed friends when they got to America and they had a lot of mutual friends. My uncle, my dad's brother, knew my mom and her siblings. And because of the connection, they just decided to pursue a relationship and it's been history ever since.

John Caher: Wonderful! What have your parents and grandparents told you about life in Haiti?

Esther Louis-Juste: They tell me all the time that life in Haiti was great. They were very big on their communities, very close-knit communities. Everyone knew everybody in the town, fresh fruit, cool blue waters, busy streets, busy cities, depending on where you're at, warm weather. So of course coming to New York with the cold and winters was a culture shock. But one of the things that my parents always talk about is the beautiful beaches and the fresh fruit, mango specifically.

John Caher: Were they fluent in English when they came here?

Esther Louis-Juste: No. So back in Haiti, they took classes where the professors would teach them how to write in English. However, most of their classes were in French. So when they came to America, they had to take an English proficiency class in the local schools. And my mother was telling me that she learned how to speak English by watching the news or interacting with people on a day-to-day basis. She was just like, "I knew how to write English, but I didn't really know how to speak it." So with the help of the school and with the help of just watching the news and just interacting with people, that's how they were able to pick up the English language.

John Caher: Wow! Now, how did they support themselves?

Esther Louis-Juste: My parents supported themselves by working. When my mom first came here, she was in school, so my grandpa would send money to help her in the midst of that. But then after she got situated and while she was in school, she started picking up a job. My father, as I mentioned, he was here on the visitor's visa. He already had a job in Haiti, but when he decided to stay, he just picked up a job and just started working and that's how they supported themselves.

John Caher: What sort of jobs did they work over their life?

Esther Louis-Juste: I know my mom had mentioned when she first started, she did a lot of different jobs, worked at restaurants, she worked at nursing agencies. Back in Haiti, she was a nurse. But when you go to school in Haiti, you have your degrees but sometimes those degrees don't get transferred. So she went back to start doing nursing all over again here in the United States.

And my father actually went to law school in Haiti. But when he came to America, he went to school for finance. Both my parents retired from the

state, but at the my mom worked at restaurants until she got her nursing stuff underway. And my father, I know he was doing some form of telecommuting before he transitioned to work for the state, and then that's where they retired at.

John Caher: What did they do for the state?

Esther Louis-Juste: Both my parents worked for the Rockland Psychiatric Center in Rockland County, New York. I'm not quite sure of their job title, but I know that that's where they were for a bit until they retired.

John Caher: You mentioned your grandfather a moment ago. Now, did he stay in Haiti?

Esther Louis-Juste: Yes and no. My grandpa wanted to come to the United States just because he always heard that there's better opportunities abroad. So he would go to the United States, stay for a couple of years and then go back to Haiti. And he did that interchangeably because he wanted to make sure that his kids were able to get a good education studying abroad. My grandpa came to the United States years ago, and he's still here in New York to this day. But when my mom came, my grandpa was in Haiti at the time with the other children. He came periodically until he decided to just stay in New York.

John Caher: Can I ask how old your grandfather is?

Esther Louis-Juste: My grandpa is 102. He turned 102 June 9th.

John Caher: Wow! What life lessons have you learned from him that arise from his roots or his experiences in that century in two countries?

Esther Louis-Juste: That's a great question. I believe he was born in 1923, so I cannot even imagine what his life looked like back then in Haiti. But one of the life lessons that I learned from him is hard work and sacrifice, and most importantly, resiliency. My grandpa was a man of many trades. He was a barber, he was a tailor. He did a lot of growing crops. He was a farmer. Him and my grandmother had shops. My grandmother was also a hairdresser. So no matter what he had put his mind to or what he wanted to do, he did it. And he did it with the goal of making sure that his family was taken care of.

So I think that's one of the life lessons that I've learned from my grandpa, no matter what you choose to do, you have the ability to do it if you put your mind to it. When we were planning his birthday, his 100th birthday,

we were creating a bio and a legacy of him, and one of the things in his bio was whatever he felt like he wanted to do, he was going to do it. If he wanted to be a taxi driver in Haiti, if he wanted to sell coffee beans, if he wanted to own a shop, he he'd take the steps to try to make those things happen.

John Caher: That's a wonderful and typical immigrant story. When I interview immigrants and children of immigrants from all parts of the globe, that's what I hear. Very, very similar story. Now, as a child of immigrants, did you feel different than the other kids?

Esther Louis-Juste: Yes and no. Growing up in Rockland County, there was a huge Haitian population, so I never felt uncomfortable or felt like I didn't belong. However, because of the fact that I was an American and my parents were immigrants, a lot of the things that other peers may have experienced, I probably didn't have the chance to experience.

I'll give you an example: Halloween. For Americans, Halloween is a huge holiday where people get dressed up in different costumes and they go trick or treating. I never experienced that. And the reason is that in Haiti, there is another day that is kind of what Halloween is like in America, but there's a negative connotation to that day. And so with my parents knowing the history of the "Day of the Dead," I believe it's called in Haiti, we weren't allowed to dress up, trick or treat because that's not a day that is a fun occasion in Haiti.

Another example I could give you is sleepovers. Growing up, kids used to do slumber parties and sleepovers and they'll go to their friend's house. That wasn't something that was a norm in the Haitian culture. So if a friend wanted me to go over and sleep, that wasn't something that we did. And I mean, I'm thankful for that now as an adult, especially looking at it in the perspective of a safety issue. But Haitian cultures really don't believe in staying the night at someone else's house. So there were things like that that made me feel different than my peers, but I never felt like I didn't belong because I was in a community that had Haitian people.

John Caher: You mentioned that one of the things you learned from your grandfather is resilience. Do you think that manifests itself in your life and in your career?

Esther Louis-Juste: Absolutely. I've had to utilize resilience on a day-to-day basis. Even just trying to become a social worker or just being where I am here today, it definitely called for resilience. There were times where I got turned down job opportunities or when I had lost my job, where if I didn't pick up and

just dust off my shoulders and try again, I don't know if I'd be here today. So resilience is definitely something that I picked up, not only from my parents and my grandparents, but just Haitians in general. We're really big on resiliency, and I definitely do think that it projects itself into my life now as an adult.

John Caher: Well, as far as Haiti, I mean, if you aren't resilient, you don't survive, right?

Esther Louis-Juste: Yeah.

John Caher: It's basically that simple, right?

Esther Louis-Juste: Yeah. I know the Haitian model is unity and strength, and just with that model that Haitians utilize, it just talks about resiliency. If you don't keep pushing yourself when the trials and tribulations come your way and you give up, it's just like you're allowing defeat to overpower you. And so resiliency is just a huge characteristic that Haitian people portray.

John Caher: Now, you mentioned social work, and I believe you studied social work in both college and grad school. Do you think your background and your parents and your grandparents influenced your selection of a major?

Esther Louis-Juste: Yes and no. So if my parents had it their way, there's this thing where we say that Haitians only want their children to be doctors, lawyers or nurses, and I didn't choose that path. I chose to be a social worker because I love helping people. And I think because of who my parents are, they're helpers, I chose that field because it just aligns with who I am as a person. And I do feel like I am my father's child. My father would help anybody if he could, a stranger, friends, family, people in the church community, coworkers. He was always just a helper, willing to do what he can for anybody.

And I think I took that trait from him, and that's why I chose to be a social worker. But I don't think, I mean, in a sense, they did impact my choice of a field because, again, they were just the best role models of it. But again, if they had it their way, they probably would've wanted me to be like a doctor or a lawyer or something like that.

John Caher: As Chief Judge Wilson has made quite clear in his last two State of the Judiciary addresses, the courts exist to help people. So when, why and how did you come to work for the courts?

Esther Louis-Juste: That's an interesting story. As I mentioned earlier with resiliency, I had lost my job back in 2021, March of 2021. I was working as a dialysis social worker. And as a dialysis social worker, you need your license to be able to see clients. It's a liability issue, especially when you're dealing with transplants and kidney disease. And so unfortunately, I had taken the exam in order to be a licensed social worker, and I failed by four points.

John Caher: Wow.

Esther Louis-Juste: And with me failing by four points, the agency couldn't keep me. And so from March of 2021, up until November 2021, I was unemployed. And I applied, I applied, I applied. And a lot of people were like, "You're qualified but you're not licensed. You're qualified, but you're not licensed." And this job, the previous job that I was working at in the courts, fell on my lap. I don't even remember applying for it. I just recall getting called for the interview and they were asking me for a writing sample. And I do remember that a lot of the roles and responsibilities align with a social worker, and you didn't necessarily need a license to do this role.

So I applied. I think I interviewed in September of 2021. I got the job offer in October, and I started working in November 2021. And I haven't looked back ever since. I felt like it was a great choice because I'm still doing social work-related stuff, even though it's not a social work-related role. The things that I love to do coincided with this role that I'm currently doing.

John Caher: Well, what is it that you do?

Esther Louis-Juste: So I am a justice coordinator. I'm the justice coordinator here in the Ninth Judicial District. And what the justice coordinator is, it is our role to make sure that we're adhering to the mission statement of the Court System. ensuring that all those who come into the courts, that they're able to have fair and equal justice and fair access to justice when they come to utilize the courts. And how I do my role is by various ways. First and foremost, I work very closely with our Equal Justice In the Courts Committee, as well as our Access to Justice Committee. And with the Equal Justice Committee, we're working on making sure that we're working on the recommendations from the Jeh Johnson report.

And with the Access to Justice Committee, it's making sure that the courts are accessible for all. I do career in the courts outreach efforts. I collaborate with local court staff on community outreach efforts. There's different initiatives that I'm currently working on. So there's various

things that we do as justice coordinators. There's one of me across the state, and of course in New York City, they have one in each court type. So it's just our role to make sure that we're doing different things to adhere to the mission statement and help our local courts implement certain initiatives related to equal justice and access to justice.

John Caher: You mentioned the Jeh Johnson report, which was a very in-depth, top-to-bottom review of the Court System four or five years ago by former Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson that I believe showed, despite progress over the last few decades, New York's justice system was not fair. Is that where this role evolved from?

Esther Louis-Juste: Yes, yes. And of course, with us being implemented, the role does so much more and we are ripping and rolling, and we are just thriving in our prospective districts by doing so much of this work, not only with the Jeh Johnson report, but again, with access to justice and collaborating with other organizations within the courts to come up with some great ideas to, again, ensure that access to justice and equal justice is being done within our local localities.

John Caher: Our listeners cannot see you as I'm seeing you, but what I'm seeing is a woman describing her job with a great big smile on her face!

Esther Louis-Juste: It's interesting when you get to a place where you didn't expect to be and it just aligns with who you are as a person, you have no choice but to smile. So I'm truly thankful to being in this role. I'm truly thankful for the leadership that we're under. I'm truly thankful for my colleagues and the work that they're doing, and it's such a beautiful thing to see how much stuff has been done in the last year when we first started back in 2024.

John Caher: What is a happy day in the life of a justice coordinator?

Esther Louis-Juste: The day of a justice coordinator varies day-by-day. No two days are the same. There's days where I'm writing reports. There's days where I'm answering emails. There's days where I'm meeting with local community partners to collaborate on certain events. Some of us, we spearhead court tours. Some of us, we oversee student interns. We plan cultural heritage events and events such as Black History Month, Women's History Month, Pride events, and the list goes on and on. We do trainings and we collaborate with other organizations to do trainings. Some of us, again, are working on virtual court access network sites.

There's days where I'm literally just calling local organizations, local schools, to tell them about the career in the courts efforts, sending out

job postings, art contests that we had, the Law Day art contest, reaching out to local schools. So the role of a justice coordinator changes day-by-day, and it keeps us busy. And what I do today will look completely different than what I do tomorrow.

John Caher: With all that on your plate, I see very little opportunity to be bored.

Esther Louis-Juste: Never bored in the life of a justice coordinator.

John Caher: What are the challenges you're dealing with right now and what challenges do you foresee over the next year or two?

Esther Louis-Juste: To be honest, I don't think there's any challenges per se. I think one of the personal challenges is making sure that whoever I encounter, whether it's a court staff or whether it's a court user in the elevator or walking around in the building, ensuring that I'm doing my best to make sure that their needs are being met, right? I think about my grandpa who's 102. If my grandpa came into this court building today, would he be able to access the courts in a safe manner? Will they be able to accommodate his language barrier or his physical barriers? Will he feel comfortable and safe? If I take the mission statement and apply it to anybody that I encounter, my challenge is making sure that people feel that us as justice coordinators and us as court staff are meeting their needs for equal justice and access to justice on a daily basis.

And so that's my current challenge, to ensure that no one ever says that they had a negative experience with me because, again, I am a representation of the courts. And so when I'm out doing career outreach and community outreach, when I'm speaking to schools, when I'm doing tours or whatever the case may be, I am elevating and advocating for equal justice and access to justice just by my words and my actions, because first impressions matter. And I don't ever want someone to feel like they had a negative encounter with me just by how I treated them. So my goal is to make sure that I am representing equal justice and access to justice through and through.

John Caher: That's wonderful. And thank you for doing that. Let's go back to your roots if we could, as we finish up, are there any distinctive Haitian customs or foods that you celebrate and would like to share with our listeners?

Esther Louis-Juste: Yes, I have two.

For some people, January 1st is just New Year's Day, right? But for Haitians, January 1st is our Independence Day. On January 1st, 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines came and he allowed Haitians to be free. And so the way that Haitians celebrate their freedom across the world, no matter where you are, you could be in Paris, you could be in Canada, you could be in New York, you could be down south in Florida, we celebrate our independence by drinking squash soup. In Creole, we call it soup joumou.

And the reason why we drink soup joumou on January 1st is because when the Haitians were slaves, they weren't allowed to have squash. The French considered squash a delicacy. And so while all the French were enjoying their meals and eating squash, Haitian slaves weren't allowed to have squash soup. So when we got our independence, we celebrated by drinking soup.

So no matter where you are on January 1st, we are drinking squash soup to celebrate our independence. And again, it goes back into resiliency. It's a way for us to fellowship together with our community. And it's not a small dish, it's a very dense soup, but we celebrate that as a community across world, celebrating our independence by drinking soup. And it is great because it's in January anyway, so it's cold, in New York at least. So it is just like, again, people are out celebrating the new year, but we're celebrating our Independence Day.

John Caher: Well, that's beautiful connection.

Esther Louis-Juste: Thank you. And I never really appreciated it back then, but as an adult, and someone who loves to cook, and I am somebody who cooks Haitian meals, I remember the first day when I made the soup myself. It's a long process, but the results were phenomenal.

And then the second thing that I would love to share with everyone who's listening is Haitian Flag Day. May 18th is our Haitian Flag Day. One of my favorite memories growing up with my father was, because my mom used to work on Sundays and my dad was off, after church in the morning we'd come home and we'll eat dinner, and then we'll all get dressed in our red and blue because our flag is red, white, and blue as well.

And so we'll have our red shirts and our blue bottoms, and we'll go to the park to celebrate Haitian Flag Day. It doesn't matter if you were born in Haiti. We would all gather in the park with our flags in our hand, our flags around our neck, people singing and celebrating, waving the flags, and

just simply enjoying being Haitian and just seeing how prideful and proud we are of being Haitian. And so I remember that to this day, I haven't gone to a parade in years, but I know when May 18th comes around, you will see all of us, even if we're not wearing our red or blue or if we don't have our flags, we are proud to be Haitians, and we are proud to be resilient people, and I just love that about us.

John Caher: Thank you for sharing those memories and stories with me today.

Esther Louis-Juste: Thank you so much.

John Caher: And thank you so much for what you do for the court system and the people who visit the court system.