

## **Bridging the Gap: Civic Engagement Coordinator Zenith Taylor**

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insights from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

A recent study by the U.S Chamber of Commerce Foundation revealed that Americans are woefully lacking in even a basic understanding of their government and democracy.

In a national survey, more than 70% failed a basic civic literacy quiz and couldn't even name the three branches of government, let alone explain what they do. In fact, a very high percentage of native-born Americans could not pass the citizenship test required of immigrants seeking to become American citizens.

Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson identified community outreach and civic education as top priorities in his administration. Last year, the Court System created a new position of Statewide Civic Engagement Coordinator and appointed Zenith Taylor to that position. Zenith is a veteran attorney who has worked with bar associations and other groups to create and deliver programs to educate the public about the workings of the courts and the legal system and to help spur civic engagement.

Zenith is very busy preparing for Civics Week March 10th through the 14th, and we're fortunate to have an opportunity to chat with her for just a few minutes.

Zenith, thank you for coming on the program. First, what is the role of the Statewide Civic Engagement Coordinator?

Zenith Taylor: Good morning and thank you for having me. The role of the Statewide Civic Engagement Coordinator is to develop and implement programs that inspire and educate the community, including students and young people, and everyone of all ages, on civic literacy and civic engagement.

John Caher: Why is that important?

Zenith Taylor: Civic engagement is important because you have to play an active part in your government and that's the only way that we're able to sustain our democracy.

John Caher: And why is it important to you? You obviously took this job. Why? Why was this important to you?

Zenith Taylor: This job was important to me because I needed something that was meaningful.

I've been a private practitioner for many years and then I became a court attorney referee and I felt that it was now time to do a job that was meaningful and that I would make a difference. And I believe that I'm making a difference in helping others to understand and learn about their government so that they can be a part of their government. Many people don't understand that we have a self-governing democracy and their vote, their activity, their participation matters.

John Caher: You also happen to work in the Third Branch of government and it seems a lot of people don't realize that there is a Third Branch of government and that it's co-equal to and separate to the other branches.

Zenith Taylor: That is correct. Many people don't realize that. There are times when I say we are a part of the government and people sort of tilt their head and give me that look, "Really?" And I say, "Yes, there's three branches of government, the Executive, the Legislative, and the Judicial, and we are the judicial branch of government. Separate but equal."

John Caher: You also had a very, I think, rewarding and meaningful career as a lawyer. What inspired you to become a lawyer?

Zenith Taylor: I think my father's friendly nudges inspired me. My dad wanted to become a lawyer. Unfortunately, he did not. He wasn't able to finish his education because of the fact that his father passed away when he was 20.

John Caher: I know your family came from Jamaica and I believe you were there as a little as a child.

Zenith Taylor: No, both my parents are Jamaican. They actually met in London and I was born in London.

John Caher: I often find that people who come here from another country maybe have a stronger appreciation for our democracy and the rule of law than people who've grown up with it. Is that your experience?

Zenith Taylor: I believe so. At a very young age, I was exposed to civic discussions and international civic discussions, and I say international because both my parents, because they were Jamaican, were very involved and participated in discussions about Jamaican politics as well as English politics. I was able to observe and hear that as well.

In addition, my mom's family was very political and around maybe when I was about 10 years old, I do recall a discussion where they used the term "assassinated" and I didn't really understand that. It was explained to me that my grand uncle was assassinated because he was campaigning and he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and he was assassinated. So that really made me start to question things more and I was included in a lot of the conversations.

John Caher: Do you think that was part of your father's interest in law and part of the reason he was interested in law for you?

Zenith Taylor: It might've been because I think that where they came from, there was more participation. When they came to this country, remember they were new immigrants, so they were more comfortable in discussing the politics of the country they came from until they became acclimated and then they become citizens of this country. Then it shifted, but they've always included civics and discussions of government and community affairs in our dinner table discussions or just family gatherings.

John Caher: Now we are beginning Civics Learning Week today. What is Civics Learning Week?

Zenith Taylor: First of all, Civics Learning Week is March 10th to the 14th, and Civic Learning Week is an annual program that iCivics promotes, and it is really to promote and inspire students and the community to learn about civics and to promote it. So there are various activities nationwide to promote civic learning.

John Caher: Is there a particular theme this year?

Zenith Taylor: Yes. Civic Learning: Many voices, One Nation.

John Caher: Many voices, one nation. That's beautiful. How does the New York State Unified Court system celebrate that?

Zenith Taylor: This will be the first ever time that the New York State Unified Court system is involved. I decided to tie in an essay contest, which was my first civic initiative. And I am now going to present certificates of achievement and participation to the top three schools that submitted essays for my Constitution Day essay contest, and inspire them as much as possible to continue their work and learn civics.

In addition, we are trying to promote and encourage each jurisdiction to have an event. And I understand that they may not be able to have it during Civics Week, but Civics Learning is not just a week, it's a lifetime.

John Caher: Did I understand you to say that the New York State Court system has *never* participated in Civic Learning Week before?

Zenith Taylor: That's to my understanding, yes.

John Caher: Of course we never had a civics coordinator before either.

Zenith Taylor: That's true. I am the first.

John Caher: What does that say about the Chief Judge's interest in this issue and commitment to it?

Zenith Taylor: It says a lot. It says that Chief Judge Wilson is committed to promoting civic literacy and civic engagement and to bridge that gap from the courts to the community.

And that's my job, not just to do court tours or to speak at schools, but it's also to go out into the community and reach out to the stakeholders as well as to foster those relationships between politicians and various faith-based leaders, so that people understand that civics has no color, has no race, has no creed. It's civics, and civics is the foundation. And without civics, you're not going to be able to participate in your government actively.

John Caher: Well put. So if an individual is interested in learning more about your office or your efforts in this regard, where do they go for more information?

Zenith Taylor: They can contact me. We have an email address [civic-engagement@nycourts.gov](mailto:civic-engagement@nycourts.gov) as well as they can contact Public Affairs. I am in the Department of Communications.

John Caher: Well, thank you so much and happy Civics Week.

Zenith Taylor: Thank you. Same to you.