

Chief Judge Nannette Jolivette Brown wants Northside High students to know they can rise

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Northside High School opened the door for alumna Nannette Jolivette Brown, Chief Judge for the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, and Friday the judge returned to her alma mater for the first time to show students the door is open for them too.

The chief judge fielded questions in two student sessions and shared lunch with students, alumni and community members at tables dotted with photos from her time as a Viking. The gathering was organized by school administrators with help from Northside's CAFÉ, a [Love Our Schools](#) initiative.

School was an escape

Jolivette Brown, the youngest of five children, grew up in the McComb neighborhood on [Lafayette's northside](#), graduating from [Northside High School](#) in 1981.

Jolivette Brown told a group of students about her struggles — neither of her parents completed high school, her dad only receiving a third-grade education, and Jolivette Brown spent significant time shouldering responsibilities, such as caring for the home, cooking and

other domestic tasks, on top of working at the mall and pushing herself in clubs and extracurriculars.

School was an escape, she said.

She worked on the campus newspaper and joined the speech and debate team, which took her around the state for tournaments and even to New York City for a national competition. Those experiences helped her build relationships and see life beyond what she knew. Jolivette Brown said she realized education had power.

“I saw people lose things all the time growing up: they got sick, they got hurt, they got caught up in something and went to jail. But you could never lose your education. That was something that, once you’ve got it, it’s yours and it’s something you can build on. That’s what was pushing me through,” she said.

A friend’s dad saw how hard she worked and encouraged her to apply to the University of Southwestern Louisiana, now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and take advantage of the Upward Bound program for assistance. While doubtful, she took the shot and was accepted.

At the time Jolivette Brown didn’t have a big dream, she just wanted to be more secure in her ability to take care of herself, she said.

“It was just across town, but it was worlds apart from what I had to deal with at home, all the distractions, all the problems, all the issues — for the first time in my life I could just focus on me,” she said.

While at USL, Jolivette Brown earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism.

It was while covering a story on a proposed landfill that Jolivette Brown first became interested in pursuing law, drawn into the complex legal questions surrounding community environmental justice and the rules surrounding waste disposal.

She earned her juris doctor from Tulane University Law School, later earning a master of laws in energy and environmental law from the same program. Once in law, Jolivette Brown said she still never charted a dramatic rise for her career.

'I wanted to serve'

The first person who encouraged her to be a judge, and helped her feel there could be space for her on the bench, was [U.S. District Court Judge Veronica Wicker](#), the first woman appointed to the federal bench in Louisiana. Wicker, who died in 1994, waved away

Jolivette Brown's doubts and told her if she worked hard, [she could get there too](#).

When a seat on the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana opened in 2011, [Jolivette Brown](#) said she knew she wanted to be the one to fill it.

She was nominated by President Barack Obama and received her commission in October 2011 after a unanimous confirmation from the U.S. Senate. She's served as chief judge since 2018, [her judicial biography says](#).

She was the first Black woman appointed to the federal bench in Louisiana history.

"I wanted to serve. I felt like that court needed an African American woman on it to represent the community, so that the people we serve could see that court and somebody that looks like them. Aside from race or the fact that I'm a woman, very few people got there coming from a place like here, like the northside, having to overcome those types of challenges," Jolivette Brown said.

Jolivette Brown shared with students about the rigorous vetting process for nominees to the federal judiciary, and opened up about what it means to responsibly wield power as a judge, especially in criminal cases when weighing punishment during sentencing hearings.

She said she loves being able to mediate conflict and help people find common ground in civil litigation, and is invested in providing re-entry support like education, job training and employment assistance to offenders integrating back into society.

'You have a way out'

Legal studies student Logan Sherrod said seeing herself reflected in Jolivette Brown was powerful. The 16-year-old junior said she found it comforting that Jolivette Brown emphasized you don't have to attend a big-name college to do important work.

Jolivette Brown's story made her feel more confident she can pursue law too, Sherrod said.

"Sometimes I do kind of doubt myself becoming anything dealing with law and seeing her and knowing her hardships and her accomplishments, it shows that regardless of the route that you go, you have a way out," she said.

John Simmons Jr., a 17-year-old senior, said he was proud to see a fellow Viking in such a position of honor. The positives of the school and surrounding neighborhoods are often diminished by the broader community, but Northside is just as capable of producing the best, he said.

“It shows that no matter where you come from, it could be the southside of town, it could be the northside of town, it really doesn’t matter,” Simmons said.

This was Jolivette Brown’s first time returning to her alma mater since graduating in 1981. While some things had changed, like the establishment of the school’s journalism and legal studies academies and increased resources, Jolivette Brown said the level of attention and care the faculty shows the students has remained the same.

That care, and the care of the community, set the stage for her life now, she said.

“I’m where I am because people cared about me...That’s Lafayette. They anchor you with all the love and support, and people are so happy for your success,” Jolivette Brown said.

“I benefited from this strong community here in Lafayette, and the Northside High community. I’m part of that community...If I can give back a small portion of what was contributed to me, I think it’s the least I can do,” she said.