

CSCHS Board Member Justice Teri L. Jackson

BY MOLLY SELVIN



Photo: Portia Collins.

JUSTICE TERI L. Jackson's older sister was supposed to be the lawyer in the family. Instead, it was Jackson who settled on law after seeing the 1962 film "To Kill a Mockingbird" — at age 5.

Today, the Daly City native is presiding judge of the California Court of Appeal, First District, Division 1, and a member of the California Supreme Court Historical Society's Board of Directors.

Jackson was confirmed to the Court of Appeal in 2020 and as presiding judge in 2021. That followed a career as a prosecutor, first with the San Mateo County District Attorney's Office and then with the San Francisco District Attorney's Office; a litigator with Orrick, an international law firm; and most recently, 17 years on the San Francisco Superior Court. Her move to the appellate bench has allowed her to read and write more. "I'm having so much fun now," she said.

Yet she worries about a misunderstanding she perceives among the public about how judges decide cases. Some people think judges decide cases based on their political views or background rather than the law, she said, a notion that erodes respect for the court system.

"When I make my decisions, you shouldn't know my political party; you shouldn't be able to tell I'm a woman or an African American," she said.

Jackson roots this confusion in a larger problem: "We have not done a great job educating the public about what we can and cannot do as judges," she said.

"We're not up on some high hill waving a magic wand," she said. "We make our decisions based on the law." She points to the "nine courageous U.S. Supreme Court justices" who overturned the "separate but equal" interpretation of the 14th Amendment in *Brown v. Board of Education*.¹

Similarly courageous judges who ordered the desegregation of Los Angeles area schools in the 1970s faced death threats and, in some cases, were turned out of office,² she added. "But they did what was right" under the law as they understood it.

Her concern about the public's perception of judges prompts Jackson to spend her weekends talking about

the court system to civic groups and church groups, among others.

She also hopes to resume holding Court of Appeal sessions in schools and other community locations to "open up our system, so everyone understands who their judges are and how their decisions are made." The COVID-19 pandemic paused that

initiative, launched by Jackson's predecessor. "This is a way people can understand what we can do." She added: "Even some attorneys don't understand how we operate."

Along with Gregory Peck — Atticus Finch in "Mockingbird" — Jackson's father was a major influence on her career choice.

Growing up in the Jim Crow South, he witnessed the lynchings of African Americans.

"He thought every white person was evil," she said, but a college literature class softened him. He read Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" and was drawn to Portia, who disguises herself as a man and then pretends to be a lawyer to save the life of her suitor.

Returned from combat in World War II and settled in Daly City, Jackson's dad decided that if he had a daughter he would name her Portia and she would become a lawyer.

For starters, he took young Portia to see "Mockingbird" with 5-year old Teri in tow. Teri found her calling.

"I saw an injustice," she recalled, when Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, was convicted and later killed by a mob. She's now seen the movie, stored on her DVR, "so many times I cannot count anymore."

Even though Atticus Finch was a white man of his time, Jackson sees in him the "moral fiber that we all have. We all have a basic concept of right and wrong, fair and not fair," she said. "If it's true that Finch was a racist, he still had a basic concept that this is not right. When I watch the movie, I go back to the basic concept of law, that it's there to protect us and not to be used as a sword against us."

A self-described "overachiever," Jackson graduated high school at 15, and earned her bachelor's degree from UC Santa Cruz, and her JD from Georgetown Law.

She's a huge movie fan. "Put me on 'Jeopardy!' for American classics for just that category," she said. Her two dogs, including a recently adopted rescue, keep her busy — and often exasperated.

Jackson was drawn to the CSCHS Board of Directors last year after attending several Society presentations, which she found "fascinating." "[We] are not frightened to talk about the whole history of California law," including the less inspiring moments, she said. ★

1. (1954) 347 US 483.

2. See, e.g., "Ex-Justice Alfred Gitelson Ordered Busing on Coast," *N.Y. Times*, Dec. 30, 1975, 49.

MOLLY SELVIN edits the *CSCHS Review*.