

2024 Michigan Reunification Day Biographies

Justice Megan Cavanagh is a life-long Michigander who grew up in East Lansing and lives in metro Detroit. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan College of Engineering and Wayne State University Law School. Before joining the Michigan Supreme Court in January of 2019, she had over fifteen years of experience as one of Michigan's top appellate attorneys and was a shareholder at Garan Lucow Miller P.C. in Detroit.

Justice Cavanagh is the Supreme Court Liaison to Tribal Courts, Child Welfare Services, the Attorney Grievance Commission and the Judicial Tenure Commission. She also serves on the Attorney General's Elder Abuse Task Force.

Justice Cavanagh has served as Chair of the Appellate Practice Section of the State Bar of Michigan, as a council person for the Negligence Section of the State Bar of Michigan, as co-chair of the Michigan Bench Bar Appellate Conference Foundation, and as a member of the Michigan Attorney Grievance Commission.

Prior to her election to the Court, Justice Cavanagh was rated as one of Michigan's Super Lawyers. She was honored by Michigan Lawyer's Weekly as Lawyer of the Year in 2006 and a Woman in the Law in 2017.

Justice Cavanagh and her husband have four children.



Justice Kyra Harris Bolden joined the Michigan Supreme Court on January 1, 2023, when she was appointed by Governor Whitmer, making her the first Black woman to serve as a Justice. A graduate of Southfield Public Schools, Justice Bolden chose to remain in Michigan for her studies, receiving her bachelor's degree from Grand Valley State University and Juris Doctor from the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law.

While serving as a state representative in the Michigan House of Representatives, Bolden advocated for Michiganders as a member of the Judiciary Committee and focused her work on criminal justice reform, crafting and passing bipartisan legislation to protect survivors of sexual violence. Justice Bolden successfully passed pieces of critical bipartisan legislation into law, including the "Medically Frail" Prison Reform package, the revision of the Wrongful Imprisonment Compensation Act, and the "Address Confidentiality for Survivors of Domestic Violence" package.

Justice Bolden has a deep respect for the law and has seen the depth and breadth of law in her years of practice and lawmaking. After becoming a member of the State Bar, Justice Bolden practiced as a criminal defense attorney. She then served as a Judicial Law Clerk in Wayne County's Third Circuit Court under the Honorable John A. Murphy. As a Judicial Law Clerk, Justice Bolden performed legal research, made recommendations to Judge Murphy on legal interpretation based upon relevant case law, and drafted opinions on a myriad of civil issues. She

then practiced as a civil litigation attorney with Lewis & Munday, P.C., in several practice areas before joining the Michigan Legislature in 2019.

Alongside her daily work, Justice Bolden is an active member of her community, serving as a member of the Oakland County Bar Association, Wolverine Bar Association, Straker Bar Association, the Women Lawyers Association of Michigan, National Congress of Black Women-Oakland County, and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

Justice Bolden has received several awards, including the 2019 Detroit Association of Women's Clubs, Inc. "Young Women Lifting As We Climb Image Award," the 2019 African American Leadership Awards "Emerging Leader Award," a 2020 *Michigan Chronicle* "40 Under 40 Award," 2021 "Legislative Economic Development Champion Award," and the 2021 Michigan Credit Union League "Legislator of the Year Award."

Justice Bolden lives in her hometown of Southfield with her husband, Dr. Greg Bolden, and their first child, Emerson Bolden.



Chief Judge Patricia P. Fresard came to Detroit at age three as an immigrant from Quito, Ecuador. Her parents, a neurologist and a nurse, brought their children here to provide a life of opportunity and always emphasized the importance of giving of oneself for the betterment of all. Fascinated with the law and social justice from an early age, Chief Judge Fresard served as a prosecutor before being elected to the Wayne County Circuit Court. She has served as a judge since 1999, initially in the Court's Criminal Division, where she tried over 500 cases and was instrumental in establishing Wayne County's Drug Court. She transferred to the Civil Division in September, 2012, where she served as Presiding Judge beginning in 2016. Judge Fresard was appointed as Chief Judge Pro Tem in 2019. She has served as Chief Judge since January 1, 2023, and is the first Hispanic Chief Judge in the Court's history. She was recently reappointed for a 2-year term. Chief Judge Fresard's mantra is "joining forces to serve better together." She sits on the boards of La Sed, the Detroit Bar Association Foundation, and the Mediation Tribunal Association. She is also a member of Wayne County's Gun Violence Reduction Task Force. In addition, Chief Judge Fresard has allocated time, talent, and resources to the crafting of a Diversity and Inclusion Plan for the Court. Outside of work, she enjoys painting and spending time with her husband, three children, and two grandchildren.



Interim Presiding Judge Sheila Ann Gibson graduated from the University of Michigan and the University of Pittsburgh Law School. She has worked as Assistant General Counsel for the City of Detroit and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan. In 1998 she was elected Wayne County Circuit Court Judge and has served there since. She served in the Family Division hearing divorce cases; in the Juvenile Division hearing delinquency cases as well as child abuse and neglect cases; and she currently serves in the Civil Division where the cases deal with lawsuits and financial issues. Her proudest achievement on the bench was the creation of the Juvenile Drug Court Program in 2001 which assists teens with substance abuse problems and have their first contact with the juvenile Court system. This program continues to exist today even though she no longer serves in Juvenile Court. She has served as a Professor for Online University

coursework and has appeared as a guest lecturer on the University level. Judge Gibson has received numerous accolades and has served on numerous Boards and Committees over the years.



Lynette Wright began her career with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) in 1993 as a Services Specialist in Wayne County. In 1999, Ms. Wright was promoted to a Juvenile Justice Policy Analyst in Central Office, and then in 2002 she was promoted to Services Manager in Macomb County. Ms. Wright has managed APS/CPS, Adult Services, Family to Family, and Foster Care/Permanency Planning staff. In addition to those duties Ms. Wright served as the Child Welfare Human Resource Liaison in Macomb County. Ms. Wright was promoted to Section Manager in Genesee County Children's Services August 22, 2010. On June 22, 2015, Ms. Wright came back to Wayne County as a District Manager for Children's Services. Ms. Wright was promoted to the Deputy Director for Children's Services in Wayne County in February 2017 and subsequently began her role as the Director for Children's Services in January 2021.

In addition to her MDHHS employment, Ms. Wright has worked as a Clinical Social Worker and Child Therapist throughout the last 25 years. Ms. Wright's vast experience ranges over thirty years in Child Welfare. She is committed to working with children and families and believes that we can all make a difference if we apply realistic interventions and strategic collaborations across the services spectrum.

Ms. Wright earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Psychology from Eastern Michigan University and a Masters of Social Work Degree from the University of Michigan.



Janet Reynolds Snyder, Executive Director of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families, leads the Federation's policy and advocacy efforts on behalf of member agencies and the children, youth, and families they're engaged with throughout Michigan. She works closely with all branches of state government—executive, judicial, and legislative, and organizes legislative testimony on issues of importance to member agencies and the communities they serve. She is a member of a wide variety of statewide task forces and advisory teams. Janet is connected nationally with the major human services advocacy organizations and serves as Past-President of the National Organization of State Associations for Children.

Janet earned her MBA from Spring Arbor University and her Bachelor's in Education and Psychology from the University of Michigan. Additionally, she earned a Mediation Certification from the Michigan State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) and completed the Domestic Violence Screening Training for Mediators also through SCAO. Janet brings to the Federation 25 years of extensive advocacy skills and knowledge of both the child welfare system and private nonprofit human services sector.



Judge Karen Braxton obtained her undergraduate degree in Economics and Political Science from the University of Rochester in 2000 and her Juris Doctorate from Case Western Reserve University School of Law in 2003. Judge Braxton was admitted to practice law in the State of Michigan in November 2003 and immediately began her legal career as a solo practitioner.

Judge Braxton was elected to serve as Judge of the Third Circuit Court in November 2012. She currently presides over juvenile delinquency, child abuse/neglect, guardianship, and child custody matters. She also adjudicates a specialty docket for youths that are truant from school and is the Presiding Judge for the Supervised Treatment for Alcohol & Narcotic Dependency (S.T.A.N.D.) Program, a juvenile drug treatment court program for youth that are addicted to alcohol and/or drugs. Judge Braxton speaks throughout the metro Detroit area, delivering presentations that address the many issues that our youth are facing and to provide pertinent information to the community regarding foster care and adoption and a host of other topics that involve youths and their families.

In addition to hearing hundreds of cases per year in the busiest court in the state, she also serves as a member of several organizations such as the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, the Michigan Association of Drug Court Professionals, and the Michigan Foster Care Review Board Advisory Committee. Judge Braxton serves on the Board of Directors for “For the Seventh Generation”, a charitable organization that provides goods and services to foster care youth. Additionally, she was recently elected to serve as a Board Member of the National Association of Counsel for Children.

Judge Braxton is certified as a Child Welfare Law Specialist through the National Association of Counsel for Children. This professional achievement signifies an attorney's specialized knowledge, skill, and verified expertise in the field of child welfare law.

Judge Braxton serves the youth and families in Wayne County with fairness, compassion, and respect and she is committed to continued exceptional service to Wayne County on and off the bench.



Judge Christopher D. Dingell is a former politician and currently a Third Circuit Court Judge, as well as a avid outdoorsman born in Washington, D.C.

Judge Dingell studied materials and metallurgical engineering at the University of Michigan. He then received his bachelor's degree from University of Michigan in 1978 and his J.D. degree from Detroit College of Law in 1986. He served in the Michigan State Senate from 1987 to 2003 representing the 7th District. A third-generation politician, his grandfather John Dingell Sr., father John Dingell Jr., and stepmother Debbie Dingell have successively represented suburban Detroit in the United States House of Representatives since 1932. During that time in the Senate, he married Cindy Dingell, now married for 30 years, and has one daughter, Gabrielle. His memberships and contributions include the Economic Club of Detroit, The Polish Roman Catholic Union, the Polish American Congress, Trenton Exchange Club, Wayne County Chamber of Commerce, the Board of Directors of the Downriver YMCA, and Safari Club International, The Michigan United Conservation Clubs as well as numerous Border Collie Dog

Rescues. Judge Dingell was elected as a Michigan Circuit Court judge in 2002, now as member of 3rd Circuit Court for Wayne County Juvenile Division.



Judge Cylenthia LaToye Miller was appointed Judge of the Third Judicial Circuit Court in July 2019 and elected to a six-year term in November 2020. By appointment of the Chief Judge, she served as the Presiding Judge of the Family Division, Juvenile Section of the court from January 2023 until May 2024. Judge Miller hears cases involving child abuse and neglect, juvenile delinquency, and related adoption, custody, and guardianship matters. Judge Miller served as a Judge at the 36th Judicial District Court from April 2006 through August 2019. She was the Founding & Presiding Judge of Street Outreach Court Detroit, a specialty court program which assists Detroit's homeless population. Throughout her tenure as a district court Judge, she presided over cases on all of the court's dockets. Judge Miller received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from Wayne State University in 1988 and attended the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). She received her Juris Doctor, *cum laude*, from Michigan State University College of Law in 1996. She was admitted to the State Bar of Michigan in 1996 and to the State Bar of Arkansas in 1997.



Referee Kathleen Allen has been a practicing attorney in the State of Michigan for almost 39 years. She began her career in 1985 as a civil litigator specializing in discrimination and wrongful discharge litigation. A short term with a private general practice and then as a solo practitioner she enlarged her legal representation skills to include Probate, Criminal, and Family law. In September of 1999, Ms. Allen joined the Juvenile division of the Third Circuit Court as a Referee. In this capacity, she served as the Chief Referee and legal counsel for the division from 2010 through November of 2013. She is a long-standing member of the Michigan Juvenile Court Rules and Court forms committees; SCAO Taskforce Court Improvement Plan Committee, Quality of Legal Representation and court improvement committees, several Juvenile Justice compliance and reform initiatives, as well as the MDHHS Quality Service Review Team. Ms. Allen has presided over the Wayne County Baby court docket, serving on both the State and County levels to support the zero to three model. She has presented at numerous conferences as well as collaborated on the creation of an 8-hour Baby Court training video. In December of 2023, Ms. Allen was published in the *Oxford Handbook of Developmental Psychology and the Law* on a chapter she co-authored entitled, *The relational Context of Early Development: Consequences of Maltreatment in infancy and Effective Early Intervention*. Kathleen has been married to Daniel Allen for 28 years and is the proud Mother of three children. Her favorite motto is "Always do the Right thing...even when no one is watching."



Referee Wanda Cal is a graduate of the University of Michigan where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Master's Degree in Library Science and a teaching certificate in secondary education. After teaching at Cass Technical High School for several years, she returned to school and received her juris doctorate degree from the University of Notre Dame Law School. Ms. Cal is licensed to practice law in the State of Michigan and Indiana. After law school she opened her own law office and has practiced in district, circuit and federal courts throughout the State of Michigan and Indiana for over 40 years. She has represented adults and juveniles in both civil and criminal cases. After Ms. Cal closed her law practice, she accepted a position with the Wayne County Juvenile Court as a Referee. Ms. Cal has always been passionate about the rights of juveniles and their families and strongly beliefs in the goals and principles of juvenile court system to help families reunite.



Referee Sean Kerman is a graduate of the University of Michigan. After finishing law school Sean served as an Assistant Attorney General for 21 years representing DHHS in child protective proceedings before being appointed as a juvenile court referee in 2019. Sean has been happily married for 16 years and his daughter Katelyn is the light of his life



Referee LaChelle W. Logan has been a Referee with the Third Circuit Court, Juvenile Division since 2022. Prior to joining the court, she was in private practice for over twenty years representing parents and children in abuse and neglect matters and juveniles in delinquency matters. Referee Logan enjoys helping the families by ordering services that will assist and benefit the families that come before the court. One of the greatest rewards of her job is reunifying families. Referee Logan graduated from Michigan State University with Bachelor of Science and the University of Toledo College of Law with a Juris Doctorate.



Demetrius Starling is the Senior Deputy Director of Children's Services Administration, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Director Starling has worked in the child welfare field for more than 20 years. He began his career as a Child Protective Services specialist in Wayne County. Since then, he has held various management roles including as a first line, services program manager, and state administrative manager in the Division of Continuous Quality Improvement. Director Starling has served on many special teams as well – including the statewide CSA Anti-Racism Transformation Team, Court Improvement Process Team, and as the CSA representative for the Michigan Action Plan for Father Involvement Advisory Group.

Following a tenure as the social services division administrator in Genesee County, Director Starling served as the county director for Sanilac and St. Clair counties. In February of 2020, Director Starling was appointed as the in-home services bureau administrator over prevention, preservation, and protection programs. In May of 2020, he became the Executive Director of the CSA. Director Starling has been an integral part of formulating diversity, equity, and inclusion

initiatives, human trafficking initiatives, the Handle With Care work, and various continuous quality improvement teams.



Leila Sanders is a Parent Partner at Black Family Development, Inc., a private, non-profit comprehensive family counseling agency.

“Ms. Sanders consistently focuses on the precise goals of each family's service plan, as established by their referring worker and the court. This strategic method of helping the parents identify their personal goals often causes the parent to reach an enhanced level of self-motivation. The collaborative approach Ms. Sanders takes, empowers each parent to take greater ownership of their plans and their overall future.

Ms. Sanders goes above and beyond for each of her parents by making weekly trips to community food giveaways and self-delivers baskets of food to several families each week. Ms. Sanders has assisted with transportation to clothing closets and has provided coaching on proper attire for job interviews. Ms. Sanders surely inspires her teammates with her track record of reunifications, in just the last year she successfully supported 8 families towards reunification.”

Nominator: Ashley Ballard



Nancy Pfeifer is the PCC Co-Director/Director of Family Preservation Programs at the Professional Counseling Center of Port Huron.

“Nancy began working in family preservation as a direct service worker in Families First in 1992, she quickly became the FFM Supervisor in 1996, went on to become Program Manager in 2004, and finally Program Director. When Michigan advanced its efforts to keep families intact and created additional programs like Families Together Building Solutions and the Family Reunification Program, Nancy was there, first to come to the table at PCC and bid to serve families. Nancy has participated in countless boards and committees throughout her tenure at PCC, becoming the chairperson of PCC's Community Services and directing the Christmas Project, providing countless families gifts for their children.

Nancy leads by example, advocating for the families she works with as well as her staff. Nancy's skills are unparalleled. She not only knows these programs forward and backwards, but she sees the big picture; the impact they have on communities. Nancy's vision for what services need to look like helps propel her staff forward and make permanent reunification not only possible but probable. Nancy is always available for those we serve and her team, working nontraditional hours answering calls no matter the time or date, meeting with clients and staff who need to talk things through, and even commuting long distances to various offices and locations to ensure that families get Christmas presents for the children. Nancy has profound,

meaningful relationships with service providers across the thumb region of Michigan resulting in trustful interactions.”

Nominator: Christina Agle



Brittney Barros is a Child Welfare Scholar, Advocate, and LLMSU/MPP Policy Social Worker. Brittney has spent most of her free time being a foster youth voice as President of her group Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative (MYOI) and as a State Co-Director for the Park West Foundation, spreading awareness of resources available to those who have been in foster care. Brittney sits on the board of directors for a local nonprofit organization, the Student Advocacy Center, that works to promote the right to education for at-risk students. She is also a past member of the National Foster Youth Alumni Policy Council, a national group that works with key stakeholders in child welfare to improve child welfare policy. Brittney completed the Foster Youth Internship through the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute where she wrote a published policy brief to both Congress and the White House on sibling separation in foster care. Taking her desire to transform pain into policy, she honorably served as a congressional intern for U.S. Senator Gary C. Peters. Brittney has also written federal legislation, the Protecting Sibling Relationships in Foster Care Act which has been introduced in the U.S. Congress with support of dozens of organizations and congressional co-sponsors across the country.

Taking her desire to make a change within the social system, Brittney holds a bachelor's degree in social work and a minor in music from Eastern Michigan University. As a distinguished Child Welfare Scholar, Brittney obtained her first master's in social work with a concentration in welfare of children and families. Brittney is currently pursuing her second master's degree in public policy with a concentration in social policy at the University of Michigan. Employed at the Michigan Supreme Court, she founded and created the Youth Advocacy Project, serving young people in foster care to achieve quality court improvement in child welfare proceedings. Furthermore, she is the Children & Youth Engagement Coordinator for the Quality Improvement Center on Youth Engagement, Spaulding for Children, and Michigan Department of Health & Human Services. In this role, she coordinates a team with lived foster care experience. Brittney has also been featured in various media outlets, including but not limited to, CNN, Disney Channel, and the Imprint News. Her long-term goals include bringing robust systematic change to the child welfare sector and obtaining her PhD in Social Welfare.