

Jane Matilda Bolin
1908-2007

"Mr. President, today I honor the life and legacy of Ms. Jane Bolin." In her tribute to Jane Matilda Bolin, the then Senator Hillary Clinton went on to call Ms. Bolin a trailblazer. "Her lifelong dedication to social justice, civil rights, and to the betterment of our American society serves as an inspiration to us all." Indeed, Clinton was right; Ms. Bolin experienced many firsts in her life, though faced with pervasive discrimination and prejudice.



Jane Bolin was born in Poughkeepsie, New York on April 11, 1908. She was one of four children of Gaius Bolin and Matilda Emery. Her father was the first African American graduate of Williams College and practiced law in Poughkeepsie; her mother died when she was eight years old. Bolin graduated from Poughkeepsie High School at 15 and from Wellesley College in 1928; she was one of two black students in her class. She was named a Wellesley Scholar, a distinction that only the top 20 of the class earned. Bolin was also the first African American woman to graduate from Yale University School of Law, which she did in 1931; she was also one of three women in her class.

Bolin shared honestly about the discrimination that she experienced at both schools. In an essay on the matter, she said, "There were but few friendships developed... on the whole I was ignored outside the classroom... [those] days for the most part evoke sad and lonely personal memories." In an interview with the New York Times in 1993, Bolin recalled that there were Southerners at the law school who had taken pleasure in letting swinging classroom doors hit her in the face. Her childhood was also significantly impacted by news and pictures of lynchings in the South. Bolin credited all those experiences for her lifetime interest in issues of racial discrimination, the effects of poverty and other social problems in this country.

Bolin returned to Poughkeepsie and began her career as a clerk in her father's law office. After passing the bar exam in 1932, Bolin joined the New York City Bar Association; she was the first black woman to do so. Bolin married attorney Ralph E. Mizelle and they opened a practice in New York City. In 1937, she was named an Assistant Corporation Counsel for New York City and served on the Domestic Relations Court. In 1939 Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia appointed her a judge of the Domestic Relations Court, now renamed the Family Court of New York. This made her the first African American woman in the United States to become judge; she was 31 years old. The ceremony where she was sworn in as judge made news around the world. She served with distinction and was reappointed to 10 year terms by Mayors William O'Dwyer, Robert F. Wagner Jr. and John V. Lindsay. Bolin achieved major changes, which included the assignment of probation officers to cases without regard for race or religion and a requirement that

publicly funded child-care agencies had to accept children regardless of ethnic background.

When her son Yorke Bolin Mizell was born in 1941, Bolin took a leave of absence from the court. Her husband died in 1943, and she balanced being a mother and having a career. Bolin once shared, "I don't think I short-changed anybody but myself. I didn't get all the sleep I needed, and I didn't get to travel as much as I would have liked, because I felt my first obligation was to my child." In 1950, Bolin married the Rev. Walter P. Offutt, Jr.; he died in 1974.

In 1979, Judge Bolin retired after 40 years as a judge and having reached her mandatory retirement age of 70. In a letter at her retirement, she wrote: "It is easy to imagine how a young, protected child who sees portrayals of brutality is forever scarred and becomes determined to contribute in her own small way to social justice." In deed, she had. However, she did not stop there. Bolin continued as an activist for children's rights and education. After retirement, she volunteered as a math and reading tutor in the New York City public schools and was appointed to the Regents Review Committee of the New York State Board of Regents.

Bolin also served on the board of the Child Welfare League of America, the Neighborhood Children's Center, and took an active role in the local and national NAACP. She was also involved with the Committee on Children of New York City, Scholarship and Service Fund for Negro Students, the Committee against Discrimination in Housing and the Urban League of Greater New York.

Bolin died on January 8, 2007 at 98 years old in Queens, New York. She is survived by her son, granddaughter and great-granddaughter. In her remarks to honor Judge Bolin, Hillary Clinton quoted her: "We have to fight every inch of the way and in the face of sometimes insufferable humiliations." Jane Matilda Bolin never stopped fighting, and has left a remarkable example for others to follow.

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