

# Vanessa Peterson Williams, 2014–2015 Chair of the Representative Assembly

By Chanda Temple

**A**s a child growing up in Tuskegee, Alabama, Vanessa Peterson Williams always thought she'd be a television reporter.

She enrolled at the University of Alabama, focusing on journalism, sound bites, and getting the exclusive story.

But a college course in media law made her reconsider her original plans. When the instructor started talking about constitutional law, a passion for a legal career began to take root in Vanessa. She had found her true calling. She wanted to be a lawyer.

"When you are talking about the rights of people, you get the idea that you can change the world," she said.

Vanessa was ready to set the world right.

She graduated from the University of Alabama in 1992, enrolled in the College of William & Mary Marshall-Wythe School of Law, and started to go after her new dream. But after one year in law school, she was ready to quit. She didn't know if law school was right for her.

"Most of my law school classmates had dreamed of being lawyers all their lives, and I had just considered going to law school the year before enrolling," she said. "Law school offered a different style of learning. I went from sitting in a lecture hall of 500 students, where professors had no idea if you were in attendance, to a smaller school with smaller classrooms. The student population ranged from recent college graduates to second-career students. I wasn't even 21 years old yet."

Professors called on law school students—a lot. The focus was intense. Vanessa was always prepared, but she still wondered if it was the right fit.

An internship that next summer would prove she had made the right decision. The internship was with the American Civil Liberties Union in Montgomery, where Vanessa interviewed foster children from around the



Vanessa Peterson Williams

state to help implement the consent decree in the Alabama child welfare and foster care reform case *RC v Hornsby*. The experience affected Vanessa and showed her she could change the world, one life at a time. The internship also fueled a passion for advocating on behalf of at-risk youth—one she maintains today.

After graduating from law school in 1995, she went to work in private practice at Plunkett Cooney's Detroit office. Seeking to fulfill her desire to continue to work with at-risk youth, she joined the Barristers Section of the Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association (she would later serve as the section's president) to work on programs in

the Detroit public schools. Throughout her career, Vanessa has also organized and participated in public service activities focused on at-risk youth as a member of the Tort Trial and Insurance Practice Section of the American Bar Association, and is serving a second term as chair of the ABA Commission on Youth at Risk. She is the immediate past president of the Ypsilanti chapter of Jack and Jill of America, Inc., where she works to promote leadership, juvenile justice, healthcare, and education initiatives for youth in her community.

Vanessa is chief legal counsel and global privacy officer for IHS, Inc., focusing her practice on corporate law matters including litigation management, software and data product licensing to automotive-related entities (including insurers), data privacy, and international law. Outside of the office, she's heavily involved in issues facing the profession and access to justice for the public. Vanessa served as a Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association board member for many years and was president of the Association for Defense Trial Counsel. She has served as a State Bar of Michigan representative to the ABA House of Delegates, as editor-in-chief of the ABA's *The Brief* magazine, and as an active member in the ABA TIPS Section. She earned her MBA from Wayne State University in 2008 while working full time, raising a family, and serving as a local bar leader.

Vanessa has represented the 6th Circuit in the Representative Assembly since 2008.

"When you are talking about the rights of people, you get the idea that you can change the world."

Photo by Tammy Allen



Vanessa, with the support of her 11-year-old daughter Mackenzie, being sworn in by Michigan Court of Appeals Judge Cynthia Stephens

She was elected clerk in 2012, ascending to vice chair and now chair. As chair, she hopes to focus the Assembly on moving the bar forward in supporting the integrity of the profession and protecting the public.

"I think our main purpose is to protect the public," she said. "One way to do that is through an organized, mandatory bar,

where the Assembly can continue to put forth bar policy that maintains a court system where [lawyers] can provide our clients and the public in general with access to the best justice system in the world."

Vanessa and her husband, Ronard Williams, live in Canton with their children, Rubin, 14; and Mackenzie, 11. ■



Vanessa with her family—Rubin, Mackenzie, and Ronard—after an afternoon of Warrior football and Sharks volleyball

*Chanda Temple is a 20-year veteran journalist now working in public relations in Birmingham, Alabama. She blogs about being better in careers and more at <http://www.chandatemplewrites.com>. Chanda and Vanessa became friends in 1989 as "roving reporters" for The Crimson White on the campus of the University of Alabama.*

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