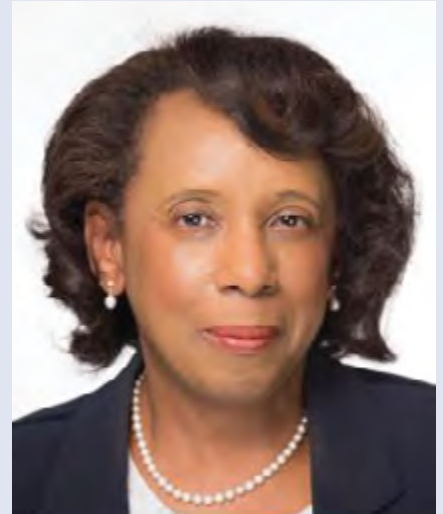


7 questions and a closing argument

Member Spotlight with Eileen D. Millett



Millett is a partner at Phillips Nizer in New York City. She lives in Metuchen, NJ.

What do you find most unexpected about being an attorney?

As a petite woman of color, it is not uncommon for people to act genuinely surprised when I tell them I am an attorney, particularly if they are unaccustomed to encountering female attorneys. But whether gender or race, it can also be off putting, given that we are in the 21st century.

What do you find most challenging?

Balancing home and family – especially when a client cannot take no for an answer and wishes to have an answer instantaneously, even when you have explained that you are about to get on a plane or that you are at an airport going through security.

Who is your hero or heroine in the legal world?

Justice Betty Weinberg Ellerin, former Associate Justice of the First Department, Appellate Division is my living hero, and is a giant in spite of her stature. Her insightfulness, easy grasp of the big picture and vision for the future endear her to me.

Who inspired you to become a lawyer?

John Sydney de Bourg, my great grandfather, is a man I never met, but with whom I always felt a deep kinship. I think the connection flowed from my mother's deep and abiding admiration for him and his equally for her. Shortly after immigrating to the U.S., he was accused of practicing medicine without a license because of his invention "de Bourg's Rheumatic," a cure-all he had patented. He defended himself and won. I grew up thinking he was

a lawyer, but he wasn't. He was a schoolmaster, and he was the leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) for South and Central America and the provinces of the West Indies. His presence loomed large in my growing up, and I admired the unqualified confidence he displayed throughout his life, reinventing himself in his adopted country.

If you hadn't become an attorney, what career path would you have pursued and why?

Likely medicine. My dad, a Trinidadian immigrant, was an inspiration. He left his adopted country, the U.S., for his second adopted country, France, to study medicine at the Sorbonne and achieved the highest marks of any foreign student. If you are the oldest you are expected to set the example, making it difficult to go against the expectations that parents drill into you. So, having a doctor for a dad made considering anything other than medicine sacrilegious. My father didn't succeed with me or my siblings, but did with his grandchildren.

If you could dine with any lawyer—real or fictional—from any time in history, with whom would it be and what would you discuss?

I would wish to dine with Atticus Finch, as his choice to defend what at that time and in that place was almost indefensible, has to have lessons for our times. Finch is a shining example of doing the right thing against all odds, and I'd have to ask him, "Why did you simply not go through the motions, why did you treat Tom Robinson's defense as a serious matter, despite the prejudices?"

What is your favorite book?

History holds so many lessons, and these days, I return to *No Ordinary Time* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. The title is prescient for our times. We see Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt making missteps, but taking big actions nonetheless. They were bold and undeterred and had the right dose of humanity. Kerns Goodwin's book is a window into the complexity and nuance of their relationship. Toyota's new mantra, "Start your impossible," is a fitting one for their relationship and for today.

Closing argument: Why should lawyers join the New York State Bar Association?

Lawyers are the bulwarks against chaos and tyranny, and stand for upholding the rule of law. In uncertain times, it is vital that we find a path to benefit the whole and not simply those who share our point of view. That path is easier if you have connected with lawyers from different parts of the state who have divergent practices. If you've swapped stories about your children, shared cocktails and dinner, and unexpectedly had your hand held in trying times, you will understand why NYSBA is critical.