MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: A CLERK’S PERSPECTIVE OF CHIEF JUDGE JONATHAN LIPPMAN

Margaret Nyland Wood*

In just a few short years, Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman has had a tremendous impact on the New York State Court system. Among other things, he has created a task force to investigate wrongful convictions,1 devoted himself to expanding access to civil legal services,2 and tackled the issue of judicial campaign contributions.3 At the same time, he has led the New York Court of Appeals in a new direction. For example, during his short tenure on the Court, the number of non-unanimous decisions issued by the panel has increased, along with the rate at which the individual Judges of the Court grant criminal leave applications.4 But there is much more to Jonathan Lippman than these career successes. Behind the serious, driven exterior is a caring and thoughtful human being. As one of the Judge’s former clerks, I offer three brief stories highlighting these attributes—attributes that undoubtedly make him a better Judge and leader of the New York State Court system.

I began my clerkship with Chief Judge Lippman when he joined the Court of Appeals in February 2009. Prior to that, I had been working on the Court of Appeals’ Central Staff in Albany. After then-Governor David Paterson named Judge Lippman as his pick for the Chief Judge of New York State, I went to New York City to interview for a clerkship with the Judge. A few weeks later, Judge

---

* Principal Prisoner Applications Attorney, New York Court of Appeals. Former clerk to Chief Judge Lippman (2009–2010). Ms. Wood received her J.D. from Albany Law School in 2007, where she graduated magna cum laude and served as a Note and Comment Editor of the Albany Law Review.


4 See Dissenting Often, State’s Chief Judge Establishes a Staunchly Liberal Record, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 9, 2011; Vincent M. Bonventre, Toward the Lippman Court: Flux and Transition at New York’s Court of Appeals, 73 ALB. L. REV. 889 (2010).
Lippman’s appointment was confirmed by the Senate, and he immediately came to the Court to start working. Just a few hours after his arrival, I received a call to report to his chambers, where the Judge offered me the position. I immediately accepted, to which he responded with one of his classic lines: “It will be great, kid.” The next week I traveled to New York City to find an apartment. After a few frantic days of looking, I found a small studio in a neighborhood close to work. When the Judge heard I had signed the lease, he called me into his office and started peppering me with questions. “Where is the apartment?”; “Is there a doorman?”; “Is the building secure?” After some back and forth, I was eventually able to convince him that the building and neighborhood were safe. “Good,” he said, explaining that he had a daughter close to my age, and hoped that someone would look out for her if she moved to a new city.

Many months later, Judge Lippman called me into his office for another interrogation after he learned that I had gotten engaged. As he sipped on his trademark hot tea, he asked me about my fiancé—where he was from, where he worked, and what his family was like. Judge Lippman listened with full attention, genuinely interested in my answers. Indeed, we talked about the small town from which my now-husband hails. Judge Lippman had attended summer camp nearby. Once he finished grilling me, he said: “Well, I’m very happy for you. Marriage is a wonderful thing. I should know.” He spoke about his wife, their many years of marriage, and their children. Just a few days before my wedding, I received a letter in the mail from Chief Judge Lippman:

Dear Maggie: I greatly regret being unable to attend your wedding . . . Please know that my love and thoughts will be with you. I know that the wedding will be a day of total joy and happiness, and the beginning of a wonderful new life together for the two of you. After 41 years of marriage, rest assured, that I am a firm believer in the institution and I am a firm believer in you . . . JL.

The letter, now framed, remains one of my most cherished wedding keepsakes.

Shortly after my clerkship ended in February 2010, the Chief was asked to speak at an Albany Law Review Symposium on wrongful convictions, which he invited me to attend. When the symposium ended in the early afternoon, I walked out of the law school with the Judge and his Chief of Staff. I assumed that they would be heading back to Manhattan, but the Judge surprised me by inviting me to
lunch and asking me to recommend a “local joint.” I was a little nervous recommending a place, but I chose an old standby—the Fountain Restaurant, a family-owned pub that former Governor George Pataki frequented when he was in town. There, Judge Lippman, his Chief of Staff, and I enjoyed pub food and chatted like old friends rather than a boss and his subordinates. We mostly talked about family, and he particularly enjoyed discussing his son’s upcoming wedding. I really treasured that lunch, knowing that the Judge rarely sits down for a meal during the workday.

What I hope these anecdotes impress upon readers is that Judge Lippman is not only an accomplished Judge and administrator. He’s a man who, having just succeeded to the top position in the New York State Court system, took time out of his day to ensure that his new clerk felt safe and secure in New York City. He’s a man who shares in the joy of his employees’ happiest life moments. And he’s a man who can spar with the best litigators in New York State, but who can also shoot the breeze with a girl from upstate New York over burgers and fries. New York is lucky to have such a kind, considerate, and down-to-earth Chief Judge, and I am lucky to have had the opportunity to work for him.