

Country's First African-American Female Judge Died in January.
By Tessa Lemos Del Pino

The women's legal community lost one of its great pioneers on January 8, 2007. In 1939, Jane Bolin made history as being the first African-American female to be sworn in as a judge. Her New York City cases included juvenile and family law matters. As judge, she said she hoped to show "a broad sympathy for human suffering" and in pursuit of this ambition, she did not wear judicial robes in order to make the children feel more comfortable in her courtroom. From the bench she fought racial discrimination and worked to end segregation in child placement facilities. She was first sworn in by Mayor La Guardia and reappointed to ten-year terms by Mayors William O'Dwyer, Robert F. Wagner Jr. and John V. Lindsay. In December of 1978, she reached mandatory retirement age and then began volunteering as a reading instructor in the New York City public schools for two years until she was appointed to the New York State Board of Regents Review Committee.

She was a woman of many distinctions. Born on April 11, 1908, in Poughkeepsie, New York, she was daughter to Gaius C. Bolin, who was the first black graduate of Williams College and was also a lawyer. She entered Wellesley College as one of two black freshmen and when she graduated in 1928, she was named a Wellesley Scholar as she was one of the top 20 students of her class. Although she had been discouraged from pursuing a legal career, she was one of three women and the only African-American in her entering class at Yale Law School, where she was the first Black woman to graduate.

After graduating from law school, she first practiced with her father then went on to apply to work at the New York City corporation counsel's office as assistant corporate counsel and was assigned to the Domestic Relations Court which later became Family Court. Jane Bolin worked in that position for two years until she was asked to see Mayor La Guardia at the newly opened New York City building at the World's Fair who then swore her in as judge. And the rest as they say is history.