

## Propelled by faith: Board member braves the spotlight to accept life's 'assignments'

Elaine O'Neal's journey to become an elected official – she served 24 years as a North Carolina District and Superior Court judge and, since last fall, as mayor of Durham – seems to have come as a surprise to her.

“This is absolutely nothing that I’ve ever dreamed about, thought about,” she says. “But it’s been what I’ve been called to do. I’ve wrestled with this assignment as mayor.”

A self-described introvert who likes to keep her personal life private, she admits to being uncomfortable in the spotlight. But her faith is the force driving her life's work, and when God calls her to assume roles, she says she steps into them even when it feels uncomfortable.



“It’s by God’s grace [that I do it], because it’s not something that I do naturally,” she says. “I don’t get my energy from people. I can literally stay in my house for weeks at a time and not involve myself with anybody other than my family and friends.”

Asked about her life's achievements, she prefers to describe her work as “assignments.” Those assignments have included becoming Durham County's first female chief District Court judge in 2011 and later its first female Superior Court judge. And after retiring from the bench in 2018, she became interim dean of North Carolina Central University's School of Law, a position she retired from in 2020.

“I consider myself as being on assignment, and my sphere happens to be in government – in public service,” she says. “Some people are athletes, some people are entertainers, some people are in education. Well, mine is in government, public service. So, what I’ve tried to do is come in and fulfill those assignments. ... I’m not trying to look at it as what I’m achieving, but what is my role as a leader – or servant leader – in that sphere.”

As a judge, O'Neal says, her assignment was to make the right decisions according to state law. As a law school dean, she worked to ensure students were equipped to pass the bar exam and that the law school remained accredited. Now, as Durham mayor, her goal is to ensure residents have a better quality of life. The big issues that propelled her to run for mayor remain a priority.

“I’m trying to deal with the underlying issues and causes of crime, which include lack of housing, lack of jobs, lack of transportation,” she says. “Those big things still ring true, and what I’m doing now is trying to understand ... where are the levers that I can push – or get our council to push – to make systemic change in those arenas. So, it’s complex work – lots of moving parts.”

As the newest member of the GoTriangle Board of Trustees, O'Neal sees her role as learning so she can fulfill one of her mayoral campaign pledges to improve transit access for residents.

“For most African-Americans, we’ve not been included in conversations about transit, and how do you create a system, and exactly what goes into running a system,” she says. “In order to be a part of any kind of change, you have to have a seat at the table; so I’m glad to have a seat at the table.”

Creating access to transit covers a wide spectrum of issues O'Neal says, from welcoming people with disabilities – both seen and unseen – to creating a network that is affordable for all people and physically reaches everyone. Such a network also depends on being able to recruit enough drivers. Because Durham's population is growing rapidly and it has a high ridership among lower socioeconomic classes, she says she wants to ensure that group of riders is not left behind due to a lack of a regional transportation system.

“It’s a complex system because now we are growing,” she says. “So, you have to think about regional access as well as local access. There is the bus, and there is the commuter rail. There are lots of moving parts in dealing with transportation, which is key to people being able to make a living and have a living.”

A commuter rail system would “most definitely” be helpful, she says, but it “cannot come at the expense of our bus system.” She remembers taking the city bus as a child to go to school in the fall and work in the summer, and she wants to ensure that today’s young people have the same transit opportunities.

“I always want to keep an eye on making sure that the least are at the table, that they have a voice at the table to be a part of how we build a growing city [to serve] the transportation needs of not just a few, but for the masses,” she says.

Born and raised in Durham, the youngest of five children, O’Neal says faith, family and education were important from the start. Her parents, neither of whom graduated from college, created a happy home despite the hardships they had endured growing up.

“The best thing about me is my family,” she says. “I am just so grateful for my family and especially for my parents. Even though they grew up in the segregated South, they never really complained about any of that. You never really heard them say an unkind word about other people. They went and made a life for themselves and their family. I was a very secure child in the care of my mom and dad.”

A World War II veteran, her father worked at the Liggett & Myers tobacco factory while her mother was a housewife. Both Durham natives, O’Neal’s parents were very active in their community and church, and watching them inspired her. Her mother helped with voter registration and was her school’s PTA president. Her father built the house they lived in, and they grew the vegetables they ate.

“I developed that kind of work ethic,” she says. “You learn how to not only care for your family first, but also how to care for the neighborhood and your extended family. So, I got all of those values from my parents.”

Her upbringing in the Christian faith – taught to her by her parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles – continues to motivate her, she says, noting, “We have been a family of strong Christian faith on both sides of my family for generations. They instilled that in all of their kids and in both sides of my family. It’s pretty much our faith that motivates us and keeps us going.”

After graduating from high school, O’Neal says she was torn between getting a master’s degree in business administration and a law degree. However, after learning that some MBA graduates were out of work, she decided on law school at N.C. Central because she knew lawyers could be self-employed.

Later, at the request of an elder in her community, she became involved in the Durham Committee on Affairs of Black People, a local political organization, and one day, she was asked to run for judge.

“For some reason, I said, ‘I’ll do it. I’ll run for judge,’” O’Neal recalls. “It wasn’t a part of my dream or something that I planned. It was just one of those kinds of moments of faith in life.”