

JUDGE DOROTHY NELSON



All rise for the Honorable Dorothy W. Nelson." When Judge Nelson enters her courtroom in Pasadena, California, everyone stands to show respect. But it was standing up for *others* that inspired her to study law. As a teenager in Los Angeles, she led a club for poor kids and saw the courts affect their lives. She decided, "I'm going to be a lawyer . . . They seem to have the power to make things better."

Dorothy became a Bahá'í after graduating from law school, and went on to a distinguished career of service to the law, and to the Bahá'í Faith. She was the first female law professor at the University of Southern California, *and* the first female dean at any major U.S. law school.

In 1969, she was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) of the Bahá'ís of the United States, the body that guides national Bahá'í activities. Since then, she was re-elected annually, until her retirement in early 2009.

Today, Dorothy continues her work as a federal judge, a post to which she was appointed by President Jimmy Carter in 1979. Dorothy has won many awards in law, and she helped found the Western Justice Center, which promotes peaceful conflict resolution. She lives in California with her husband, the Honorable James F. Nelson, who also served as a judge and long-time member of the NSA before he retired.

Q. What's your favorite childhood memory?

Going to the beach house. Actually, during the Depression,* we had to live in it for a year . . . [I have] these wonderful childhood memories with our whole family. We came from people who love the beach. My mother was even a surfer.

Q. What was the most challenging experience you had as a child, and how did you handle it?

When we lived in Los Angeles, and it was during World War II, and they had to remove the Japanese . . . to these detention camps** . . . I couldn't understand why we [the U.S.] would do this to people . . .

We had a Japanese gardener, and we loved his family, and I had Japanese friends in school. And they were taken out of school, and . . . transported to these detention camps . . . Really, I had nightmares . . . I didn't know what a detention camp was, but someone told me it was like jail. And I just thought it was horrible.



At age nine, Dorothy (center) was already full of energy. She and her sisters, Nancy (left), age seven, and Elizabeth (right), age 11, grew up in California with dogs that they loved.

Q. Who are your heroes?

When I was in college, I was the student body vice-president, and the chancellor had us to lunch with Eleanor Roosevelt . . . I wrote a story for some class on Eleanor Roosevelt and her interest in human rights. I always . . . held her out as a role model . . .

Q. What do you like best about being a judge?

Wherever I travel . . . because I'm a United States Federal Judge, I find that people immediately accept what [I'm] saying. That can be good, and that can be bad, but it's giving me a larger world platform from which to work. I also like working on cases where I think I can make a difference. Judges don't make law, but . . . your background does make a great deal of difference—how you feel about discrimination, how you feel about civil rights, how you feel about the oneness of the world of humanity.

Q. You're such a champion of mediation in the legal field. What is it and why is it important?

The Bahá'í concept of consultation is at the heart of [mediation] . . . Consultation involves courtesy, listening to others, coming up with a solution that you all agree upon, where everybody is a winner. You don't have a winner and a loser . . . Mediation is less costly, less destructive, less painful, and much more efficient [than going to court]. And all of it begins with the Bahá'í concept of consultation.

Q. In this issue of *Brilliant Star*, we talk about the use of consultation in good leadership. How should kids approach consultation?

I think [they] should feel free to ask their parents to . . . consult with them, and . . . [to] learn how to become leaders, [children] should ask to be given jobs . . .

When our children were young, they found [Bahá'í] Feast boring, and they said so . . . Our [Local Spiritual] Assembly* decided, all right, every

Q. What do you think is the greatest challenge for kids today?

To try to become your true self. Try and become who you really feel you ought to be, despite the fact that some of your friends do things that really are bad, like taking drugs or alcohol or gossiping about other kids, putting them down, making them



Top: In 1980, Judge Dorothy Nelson took the oath of office for the U.S. Court of Appeals. Her husband, Judge James Nelson, administered the oath.

Bottom: Judge Nelson has traveled around the world to give inspiring talks. In 2005, she spoke about consultation at a Bahá'í conference in Florida, U.S. Photo by Eric van Zanten

other Feast [will be] planned by the children . . . When children think that things can be improved, they should . . . say, "I wish we could do things differently." . . . *Then* they should suggest *how* they should be done differently, so that they would be given the responsibility for it.

feel terrible, so that they often end up doing really bad things to themselves. Try to stay true to yourself . . . Be what you think that God would approve of, your parents would approve of . . . In the end, you will be a much happier person as well.

*A Local Spiritual Assembly is a group of nine Bahá'ís elected to guide the local community.

Q. What was your most memorable experience on the National Spiritual Assembly after serving for 40 years?

So many memorable experiences. No one can describe how you learn and grow and celebrate . . . when you feel like you're doing God's work . . . and you're trying to do it to the best of your capacity. And I certainly grew over the years, and had the experience of serving with so many outstanding people. One special memory . . . was when we went to the Lakota Indian reservation in South Dakota and smoked the peace pipe and danced with the Lakota Indians.

Q. How have you balanced your demanding career with your family and Bahá'í service?

Everybody goes through difficulties and hard times . . . But for me, having the right partner has been a key to this. Marry the person who shares your beliefs . . . and shares your idea of the purpose in life, to know and love God, and to carry forward an advancing civilization. And at the heart of that is the family . . . There are times when you do feel the strain. When I was first elected to the National Assembly, I went out into the hallway and cried and cried and cried, because my children were still young. And Jim just said, "Look, we'll work this out." . . . Before he was elected—and thank heavens it was a little while before he was—[he] planned special treats and trips



Top: Dorothy and James visited the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel in 1984. **Bottom:** For 40 years, Dorothy (first row, right) served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, pictured here in 2007. Photo by Eric van Zanten

and activities when I was at NSA meetings . . . And I realized that, when you had that kind of partnership, you could do anything.

Q. When kids talk about injustice around the world, what advice can you offer to explain why bad things happen if there is a loving God?

I think the first thing is to understand . . . that our souls are immortal, that they last forever. And that we're here on this plane of existence for a very

short period of time. And if you aren't given challenges, you won't grow . . . These challenges are given to us to help *our* souls advance . . .

Q. If you had one wish for *Brilliant Star* readers, what would it be?

Read *Brilliant Star* every single time it comes in the mail. Talk about it with your friends. When [you] have troubles in life, [you] can always find the answer

to . . . troubles through the Bahá'í writings . . . A lot of those answers to what they should do with their lives are found in *Brilliant Star*. I love *Brilliant Star*.