

The Court Reporter

A Message from Judge Linda Tucci Teodosio

Rarely does the Court have an employee who serves for 40 years. Even rarer is the employee that has remained steadfast in our mission to serve children, families, and the community, in general, and provide invaluable leadership during that time. Curtis Howard is that unique employee, and it was only fitting that we recognized him just prior to his retirement by unveiling a banner that outlined his achievements while he was here. The banner is displayed in the lobby of the Probation Department as a constant reminder of the contributions he made.

I was among a fortunate few who were able to attend the Speech Competition conducted for the first time in the Detention Center. It was an experience I will not soon forget. It's always daunting to stand before a crowd and speak. But to witness the youth who participated articulate their thoughts with such clarity and honesty, it was a very moving experience. It is my hope that the day will stay with them, too. It is my hope that they recognize the value of working on something with purpose, and substance, and introspection. I think they, as well as attendees, came away with something learned.



Judge Teodosio



Linda Tucci Teodosio

Banner Recognizes Service of Longtime Employee

The Court's Holiday Buffet is an opportunity for staff members to gather for fellowship and to celebrate the season. But, the event, for the first time, was also the backdrop to celebrate the 40-year career of a man who rose through the ranks to eventually become an Assistant Court Administrator.

Curtis Howard came to the Summit County Juvenile Court as a Group Counselor in 1984. He was based in the Probation Department during his tenure at the Court. His trajectory through the department was on a steady, upward arc. He was named a Probation Community Worker in 1986, Senior Probation Officer in 1997, Department Supervisor in 2000, which culminated with his promotion to Chief Probation Officer.

It was in that capacity that Howard made his greatest impact. His assignment as Chief Probation Officer coincided with the evolution of juvenile justice in the Summit County community when Judge Linda Tucci Teodosio began her administration of the Court in 2003.



Curtis Howard stands with his wife, Diane, and Judge Teodosio following the unveiling of a banner that notes his achievements in his 40 year career at Juvenile Court.

The Court underwent a series of policy and procedural changes. Many of them affected the Probation Department, and Howard was tasked with implementing them. One of the primary changes was the Court's embrace of the principles of the nationally regarded Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative (JDAI) and the Probation Department played a pivotal role in its application. Later, when the Court shifted its emphasis to expediting cases through diversionary measures, Howard guided the department through the conversion.

One of the hallmarks of Howard's leadership was the positive work environment he established in the department. He constantly encouraged staff members to believe in themselves and their mission. Away from the office, he was a positive presence in the community.

Taking into account all that he accomplished, Judge Teodosio appointed Howard Assistant Court Administrator in 2018. He served in that position until announcing his retirement at the end of 2024.

Judge Teodosio wanted a way to acknowledge Howard's contributions to the Court. She decided to embrace tradition. For 15 years, the Juvenile Court has honored individuals on a local and national level who have had an impact on the Summit County community by displaying a banner recounting their achievements. Among past honorees have been Sojourner Truth, Harriett Tubman, Rita Dove, Ed Davis, Judge Mary Cacioppo, and Ohio Supreme Court Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor. She determined that Howard would be the first staff member to be recognized with a banner.

At noon of the staff party, Judge Teodosio asked those present if they would turn their attention to the banner that was covered with a cloth shroud. She revealed that the banner would be unveiled at that time to honor Curtis Howard. Judge Teodosio recounted how valuable Howard's experience was to her and her new staff when they arrived in 2003.

"He has been so giving of his expertise, his time, and his talent by mentoring all of us as we started our journey to becoming advocates for children and families," she said. "I don't think there's a person in this room who hasn't been touched in some way by the good advice and the example that Curtis Howard has presented both at the Court and in the community by working for the betterment of children and families."

At the conclusion of her remarks, she called Howard and his wife, Diane, to come forward to unveil the banner. Afterward, with 12 family members and his colleagues looking on, Howard took the podium. He recounted his many years of service and how he was able to work with so many colleagues through the years that influenced and impacted his life. He noted how much he enjoyed collaborating with Judge Teodosio and Court leadership as they fostered change in the juvenile justice system.

"I'm so grateful for the opportunities I've had here in the Summit County Juvenile Court," he said. "It has been so good to me and my family. It's a career I never dreamed of."

Fittingly, the banner will be displayed in the lobby of the Probation Department.

Speeches and Poetry from Youth Highlight Event in Detention

Self-expression is a form of self-awareness. That was put on full display at a recent event in the Court's Detention Center. Six youth in the Detention Center accepted the challenge to write material and recite it before a group of onlookers. It was labeled as a competition between them, but that was secondary to what was really going on. Some of the youth wrote their speeches individually, others collaborated. But the result and, frankly, the desired outcome, was that they were able to stand before a group of people who were mostly unknown to them, and demonstrate how their work opened their minds, opened their hearts, and bared their souls.

The young men were not in uncharted territory, not entirely. They were prepared for the moment by an activity in the Detention Center that was created by Re-entry Coordinator Kathy Hullum. She felt the youth needed a recreational and educational outlet. So, she developed a book club, and it wasn't long before every male youth in Detention took part. The club chose the topics and Ms. Hullum scoured resources to find an appropriate book for them to read. During book club sessions, the book was discussed and open dialogue became an integral part of the experience. The attendees decided that a name for the club was in order. They agreed on a suitable moniker: Mind Readers.

Ms. Hullum is always looking for methods to keep the Mind Readers engaged, so she proposed the speech competition on a voluntary basis, and she was pleased with the response. On the day of the competition, members of Court staff and invited guests gathered in a wing in the Detention Center. After some opening remarks from Ms. Hullum, it began. Due to space constraints, only excerpts from each poem or speech can be offered, but they do not diminish in the least the power, poignancy, and passion of the words delivered by the contestants.

The first speaker recited a poem called "Knowledge":

*Knowledge is power, don't reject or ignore that; and that's one thing that I know is a fact,
The more you know, the better off you are, Wisdom and knowledge lets you to shoot for the stars.
Reading is vital to learning new things; It's interesting the enlightenment books can bring.*

The next presenter took to task the State of Ohio's bindover policies where youth still in their teens can be bound over to the adult correctional system:

I believe I can be somebody. Do you believe I can be somebody? Because the State of Ohio doesn't believe I can be anything.

He detailed the disparity of Black youth being bound over and how research has indicated that the brain doesn't fully develop until the age of 25, and how that lack of critical thinking contributes to a youth making a serious mistake just one time, and the devastating consequences that result.

If you don't believe in me, please believe in the research I have done. Pleased believe that everybody should be given a chance. I, and others like me, are counting on your belief.

Next, was a group of three youth who collaborated on a speech called, "Misunderstood." Each outlined the challenges of living in an environment void of opportunities that reach beyond their neighborhood; how joining a gang becomes an option when there are few others available.

We are more than our mistakes. We are complex individuals with hopes and dreams and fears. We want to share our experiences, share what it feels like to be judged without fully understanding. We fear there is no way out. Imagine what is like to not be able to feel safe in your own community. We are all young men who want the same things you want: love, safety, success, opportunity, and purpose. But many of us don't have support to give us that. The best we are told, most of us want help and want peace in our neighborhood. We just don't know how or who to ask.

The final presenter first read a few lines from the poem he read that inspired his speech. It spoke of a rose that grew from the concrete, symbolizing that nothing is impossible to grow, even under the most difficult of circumstances. He then delivered his work:

The concrete is not our last stop. Growing up in the inner-city, surrounded by poverty and violence, it can feel like we are trapped here, like the system has already decided our fate. Statistically, we are supposed to live in poverty, live in single-parent homes, and for many of us, incarcerated before we can attend our graduation. We started from the bottom, no doubt about it. We survived some of the toughest, most dangerous environments. But we are much more than statistics. I believe we were given the tools to learn, to see things forward, and opportunities to fortify our mind. We can be anything we aspire to be. I refuse to believe the concrete beneath my feet is the ceiling of my potential. I know the sky's the limit, not the bottom side of the concrete.

At the conclusion of the event, Detention Superintendent Melissa Gerney addressed the contestants.

"I just want to thank all of you young men for all that you did," she said. "You should feel very proud of yourselves. I also want to thank Ms. Hullum who has devoted countless hours with not just these young men, but to all of the youth in Detention. We appreciate you very much for all your time."

While it might sound trite, it's also true: everybody won in this competition.