In 1995, Cecil Patterson, Jr. became Arizona’s first African American appellate court judge. It was the latest in a string of “firsts” that has kept him in the public eye for 30 years.

“It puts you in a fishbowl,” says Patterson, who still presides in the state court of appeals. “It’s difficult because you have to recognize who you are, to sit down and decide whether you can become the person who is the standard bearer, the role model, the mentor, the trailblazer. The person who—as bad as it may sound—will make it easier for those who follow, so they don’t have to cope with or climb over the same barriers that you had to.”

As a young man of color coming of age during the civil rights era, nearly everything that Patterson wanted to do would set him up to become one of the first, intended or not—law student, attorney, judge. More compelling than his history of firsts, though, is Patterson’s history of service in the profession and the community.

He earned his law degree from Arizona State University in 1971, and then worked on fellowship for a year as a staff attorney for the Maricopa County Legal Aid Society. That early work in the field helped mold Patterson’s view of the world—a view that began to take shape, he says, as a young boy working at his family’s laundry business.

“My dad’s laundry was located in a relatively impoverished neighborhood in the heart of the city in Newport News, Virginia,” says Patterson. “So I got exposed to a lot of activity, to everyday comings and goings, as I was growing up. That exposure to the lives of people who were less fortunate than I was helped foster an empathy that I still have today and a respect for the challenges that people face.”

Patterson tried his hand at private practice for a year, but he soon discovered that operating a business wasn’t what motivated him. He just wanted to practice law.

He went on to serve as legal counsel and housing discrimination attorney for the Phoenix Urban League and as a trial deputy in the Maricopa County Public Defender’s Office. In 1980, he became Arizona’s first African American superior court judge—a post Patterson applied for an unprecedented eight times before receiving the appointment.

“It was frustrating as all get-out, because I knew that I could do the work,” reflects Patterson, shaking his head and smiling. “But it was going to change the culture, and a lot of people weren’t ready for that or didn’t want that.”

With perseverance, Patterson overcame the barriers, as he had so many times in the past. And he found himself once again in an environment, in a culture, with which he was not only unfamiliar but also, at times, still somewhat unaccepted. “And that’s when you recognize that you’re in the fishbowl, and you will always be in the fishbowl,” he says.

Patterson has held numerous leadership and board positions in professional and community organizations, including the YMCA, United Way, Samaritan Health Services, Red Cross and NAACP. He has served the Arizona and Maricopa County bars and the American Bar Association, and most recently he was appointed chair of the ABA’s Judicial Council, an organization of 1,800 predominantly African American judges, justices and judicial officials. As a result of his involvement, Patterson has received numerous honors, including the City of Phoenix Martin Luther King Jr. “Living the Dream” Award, the National Association of Attorneys General Marvin Award, the Arizona Black Lawyers Association Trailblazer Award, and the ASU College of Law Distinguished Achievement Award.

Clearly, Patterson not only proved he could do the work; he proved he’s worthy of having been the first, the person who has made it a little easier for those who followed.

But at the heart of it all, and after all these years, he still just wants to practice law. Patterson’s greatest reward, he says, comes from mentoring the young lawyers who clerk in his office. “I like to help bring them along, to mold them. And out of that comes the satisfaction that I will be perpetuating something that means so incredibly much to me.”

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