



KAREN COCHRANE-BROWN

FORMER DIVISION DIRECTOR,
NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

“As a child, I was precociously verbal. And also pretty argumentative,” Karen Cochran Brown said with equal parts humor and sincerity.

From an early age, these qualities led Cochran-Brown’s mother to suggest she become a lawyer. Add to those innate verbal abilities a keen interest in government, which was kindled in high school, and Cochran-Brown had her career path all but laid out for her by the time she started college in New York in 1973.

As she studiously watched the Watergate hearings with her father in 1974, Cochran-Brown admired Texas Representative Barbara Jordan in particular, further fueling her interest in government. “She was the most articulate person I’d ever heard. I was so inspired,” she noted.

And while she never felt the pull of politics in particular, Cochran-Brown had a fascination with the mechanics behind politics and governing, which manifested in her career trajectory from start to finish.

After graduating from Albany Law School, Cochran-Brown clerked for the New York State Court of Appeals and then served briefly as Assistant Attorney General for the New York State Department of Justice. It was in this role that she crossed paths with Karl Nisoff, general counsel for the New York State Teachers’ Retirement System. He was so impressed with her abilities that he offered her the role of Assistant Counsel within his organization, where she worked for almost eight years.

But, like so many native North Carolinians who roam elsewhere, Cochran-Brown got a bit tired of cold weather. After having her first child, she and her husband began the hunt for a home down south, with warmer temperatures beckoning. A Hickory native whose sister was working in Butner, N.C., Cochran-Brown decided the Tar Heel state was the best option for her growing family.

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She began her career at the North Carolina General Assembly as a staff attorney for the Research Division, now known as the Legislative Analysis Division. Cochrane-Brown describes this role as “technical support” for legislators who require assistance with bill analysis, preparation of amendments and substitutes, insight into implications of proposed bills, and the like.

“It was a lot of fun. It was very fulfilling to work with legislators who had a clear idea of what they wanted to accomplish,” she said.

Her acumen and proficiency impressed all those with whom she worked, and eventually Cochrane-Brown became Division Director of Legislative Analysis.

Cochrane-Brown gained recognition for many of her contributions during her 27-year tenure at the General Assembly, including her expertise on the North Carolina Administrative Procedure Act; her assistance in drafting North Carolina’s groundbreaking anti-predatory lending law; and her service as Committee Counsel and bill drafter to the 2011 Joint Legislative Study Commission on the Modernization of the Banking Law—which rewrote the NC Banking Law for the first time since 1931.

“People don’t understand how much of their lives is governed by state law,” she said. “If we don’t do our jobs well, if we don’t provide legislators the right advice, then the laws affecting the people of North Carolina simply won’t work,” said Cochrane-Brown.

And though Cochrane-Brown’s professional resume is impressive, when asked about her greatest accomplishment, she points to her ability to “raise two children, who turned out very well,” while juggling a demanding career.

“You can’t do a job like this without a support system of some kind,” she acknowledged, praising her husband and sister for their role in her success.

Cochrane-Brown also noted the importance of having support in the workplace upon moving from New York to North Carolina.

“Being a Black woman from New York meant that I probably had a few strikes against me from the beginning. You have to develop trust with legislators. Because I was foreign in some ways, it took a little bit longer.”

Cochrane-Brown added that once colleagues and legislators got to know her personally, she felt a true sense of belonging and was able to develop close relationships with staffers and politicians, alike. And though many might find it difficult to keep their personal politics out of the job, for Cochrane-Brown it was almost effortless.

“Part of the training of a lawyer is to be able to take any side,” she said. “I have a deep and abiding trust in the process. I believe our electoral process is the right process, and I wasn’t elected to do anything: I was always completely aware of that.”

Cochrane-Brown’s colleague and successor, Jeffrey Hudson, noted that, in addition to remaining nonpartisan, she was also a role-model: “Karen was a mentor and friend to several generations of legislative staffers at the General Assembly. In an increasingly fast-paced and politically polarized environment, she exemplified how to remain calm and cool under pressure while never failing to be polite and cheerful.”

Since retiring in 2020, life is no longer as fast-paced as it was, and Cochrane-Brown is taking advantage of it. After downsizing and purchasing a new home in Apex, N.C., she has spent her time decorating and enjoying book club with her sister. An anglophile, she loves catching Dr. Who re-runs and curling up with authors like C.S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayres.

Her advice to new professionals who are embarking on their career journey: “Don’t be afraid to pursue your passion... that’s ultimately the way to be successful and happy. I wound up doing exactly what I should have been doing.”

Those who know Cochrane-Brown would agree.

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