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A COUNTRY GIRL SETTING THE WORLD ON FIRE

A conversation with the Louisiana lawyer standing where energy, water, and law meet, Monique M. Edwards

Authored by: Brannon D. Lenard

On a Monday morning, I found myself sitting in an old-school Italian restaurant in Baton Rouge named Little Village. Little Village began, as many good Louisiana institutions do, with a card game, a sheriff, and someone deciding that if people were going to keep showing up, they might as well be properly fed. Across from me, Monique Marie Edwards settles into her chair, gives a small, easy smile, and then, almost as an afterthought, drops the line that defines her better than any formal introduction.

"I like to think of myself," she says, "as a country girl who's been setting the world on fire."

She says it lightly, almost as a joke. But once you know the route she has taken through New Orleans, St. James Parish, Southern Law, the Legislature, and Louisiana's energy and water agencies, it stops sounding like a throwaway line and starts to feel like the way she has been moving through the world for a long time.

Country, But With Teeth

Edwards starts her story far from any Capitol building.

"I was born at Flint-Goodridge Hospital," she says, naming the historically Black hospital once tied to Dillard University, "and I grew up in St. James Parish on the West Bank."

"My paternal grandfather was a sugar cane farmer. We lived off the land. We had a year-round garden, cows, pigs, ducks, and chickens. We hunted rabbits. My grandfather loved raccoons. I didn't eat that," she laughs. "But the message was always the same: if you did not care for nature, you would not be able to continue doing all the things we did."

Before she ever read a statute, she understood land and water as something more than scenery. They were the things that kept her family alive. Rows of cane and mornings spent hunting taught her that you take care of what takes care of you.

The Spark

The idea of law did not arrive with the sound of a gavel. It arrived in a classroom.

"In eighth grade I had a teacher, *Mrs. Denise Cyrex*. Her husband was a lawyer in Ascension Parish," Edwards recalls. "I just got excited about government, about how things work. I said, 'I'm going to be a lawyer.'"

It was not the obvious path in a family thick with medical degrees. "We had a whole bunch of medical doctors," she says. But the decision stayed with her.

"It was never my intent to be the lawyer in the traditional sense you see on TV," she says. "I saw law as a discipline that is respected. People talk about lawyers until they need one. Then suddenly it's, 'Okay, where's the lawyer?'"

Tate's Prediction

Southern University Law Center did not just give her a degree. It gave her a sense of where she fit in the larger story.

She remembers *Professor Donald Tate*, who taught civil procedure. He was from Mamou. His brother went to Paris for medical care because he did not trust American doctors.

"I told him, 'I'm leaving this state.' He looked at me and said, 'You went to Catholic school. You're well educated. You'll leave Louisiana. You'll stay gone about fifteen years. Then you'll come back, because you are a Louisiana girl.'"

At the time, Tate's prophecy sounded like one of those kindly things older people say when they think you do not understand the world yet. So she left anyway. She passed the Florida bar on her first attempt while working full-time, moved to Orlando, and started building a life there.

Fourteen years later, she came home. "When I came back," she says, "all I could do was laugh. Professor Tate knew what he was talking about."

The Pivot

There is another pattern in her story. When a system does not work for her, she does not stay and wither in it. She pivots.

Her early years in practice did not point obviously toward becoming Commissioner of Conservation.

"I went to work for Travelers," she says. "My original plan was to be an insurance executive. Travelers had this program for 'rising stars' and I was one of them."

Florida made the story more complicated.

Once she got there, the picture changed. The support she needed was not there, and she could see that the long, comfortable rise through the insurance world she had imagined was not in the cards.

“It was a lesson,” she says simply. “The career in insurance that I thought I wanted was not going to happen, so I pivoted.”

She took the Florida bar, joined a firm doing personal injury and medical malpractice, and quickly learned something else. “I realized I didn’t want to do that either.” She did some governmental relations and policy work on her own, still trying to find her niche.

Then life intervened in a way that does not care about career plans. Her father needed triple bypass surgery. Each trip home made it harder to leave again.

“You get one time in your life when you can be friends with your parents, without either side taking care of the other,” she says. “I understood I was in that window, and I didn’t want to miss it.”

On one of those visits, she called a classmate working at the Legislature. “He told me, ‘We have Health and Welfare, we have Natural Resources.’ *Health and Welfare was the obvious path. I chose natural resources, the road less traveled*.”

That choice quietly shifted the track of her life into the lane she still occupies today.

Since coming back to Louisiana, Edwards has worked for the Legislature, the Department of Natural Resources, and as Commissioner of Conservation. She has stepped out to care for family, taught at Southern full-time, and then returned to government service again.

“It’s not a straight line,” she says. “Life happens. Sometimes you pivot because you choose to. Sometimes you pivot because tragedy hits and you need to be there for your family. But you keep moving.”

When *Richard Ieyoub, Sr.* passed away and the Commissioner’s seat opened, the department already knew her and her work. Her name did not come out of nowhere. It rose naturally into the conversation about who should step in.

“The Governor’s people called and asked if I would be interested. I said yes.”

There was no steep learning curve. She had served as Executive Counsel and Legislative Liaison for the department. “I already had a bevy of experience with that office,” she says. “I knew what I was walking into.”

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The Commissioner, The Firsts, and The Box She Refuses

Edwards has spent much of her life in rooms that were not designed with her in mind. The way she carries herself there is its own kind of rule.

It is easy to list her “firsts.” She was the first African American secretary of the State Mineral and Energy Board, the first African American woman on the Mineral Law Institute Advisory Council, the first woman Commissioner of Conservation.

She does not live inside those labels. "You'll find that I never really lead with gender or race," she says. "*At the end of the day, what does it matter if you are not competent? I assume when I walk into a room that I will be underestimated, that expectations will be low, and that there will be attempts to minimize my personhood. But that is not for me to fix*."

She smiles when she adds, "I walk into the room and it is obvious I am a Black woman. Whoever has a problem with that, they have to deal with it. I am not taking on the job of making them comfortable anymore." "The people of this state will always be my priority," she says. "Everything starts there."

She is not particularly interested in fitting anyone's box outside the courtroom either. "I have no party affiliation," she says. "*I go out of my way not to fit anyone's box. Just when people think they know who I am, I do something that makes them say, 'Who is she?' It causes consternation, but I am not here to make it easy for people to label me*."

For younger Black lawyers, or really any lawyers, she has a rule she repeats. "Know your area and love what you do," she says. "But most importantly, define yourself before you get in the arena."

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She tells a story about *Judge Albert Tate Politz*, whom she met at a bar reception the day before she was sworn into the Louisiana bar.

"He told me, 'Never compromise your integrity. If they are turning the water off, repossessing your car, never compromise your integrity, because once it is gone, you never get it back.' He also said, 'Be leery of the person who comes to you, because that means they do not care about you.' I never forgot that."

She pairs that with a story from her father's campaign for parish president in St. James Parish, when a cross was burned in their yard and a group later came asking for his support in a sheriff's race.

"They asked, 'How much would it take for you to support this person?' My father said, 'A million dollars.' They laughed and said, 'We were thinking a thousand.' He said, 'No, I'd have to think about my family.' Hearing that, I understood you need to know your price before someone names it for you."

"For me," she says, "the point is not that you can be bought. I actually run from people who say, 'I cannot be bought.' Everyone has a pressure point. It is better to know what yours is, so when the moment comes, you are not surprised by yourself."

She periodically reevaluates her own "price," not because she intends to collect it, but because she wants to be ready to say no.

Teach People How to Think

In the classroom, her rule is simple: your job is to think, not just to impress.

At Southern University Law Center, Edwards' classes in Obligations, State and Local Government, Professional Responsibility, and Law Office Practice gave her a front-row seat to the next generation.

"Obligations is the gateway to Louisiana law," she says. "If you can grasp that, you can do everything that comes after." Her focus is less on producing the class rank "top" than on producing problem solvers.

"In my classes, we would work a case, then I would flip the facts and ask what result we get now. Students hated that," she laughs. "But that is what practice looks like. The facts never arrive exactly like the textbook."

She is frank about her own academic standing. "I did not graduate at the top of my class," she says. "I was in the middle. But for there to be a 'top,' there has to be a bottom and a middle. The point is not where you rank; it is whether you can solve your client's problem."

When she thinks about younger lawyers who come through her doors in practice, she looks for two things: "A willingness to learn and a lack of fear about making mistakes. You are going to make them. The question is whether you learn from them."

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Make Room for Energy, Water, and People

In her current work, the map has three fixed points. The people who live here. The land and water they live on. The energy that runs through all of it.

Edwards' work as Commissioner of Conservation and now Director of Water Administration lives at the meeting point of two visions of Louisiana, the future energy powerhouse and the place that still defines itself by its food, hunting, fishing, and water.

"I always go back to what a former secretary said," she tells me. "We power America, and we should not have to choose between being an energy powerhouse and the things that make us uniquely Louisiana: the Sportsman's Paradise, our food. There is no place on earth like Louisiana."

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She does not hesitate when the topic turns to water. "Water is the new oil," she says. "It is not only important for energy; it is important for the citizens to have a sustainable source. The Louisiana Purchase was about that great body of water I see every day from my office. If someone wants to buy water from Louisiana, that tells you what we are sitting on."

Act 458, passed in the 2025 Regular Session, put statewide water planning explicitly on the agenda. Edwards runs her decisions through a simple three-part lens: public welfare, environmental sustainability, and economic prosperity.

"Anything I am going to be a part of has to pass through those three filters," she says. "My priority will always be the citizens, but there is room for all sectors to benefit if everyone is willing to put the public first."

She is clear that the old way of doing things is not good enough if Louisiana wants serious, long-term investment.

"*We are not the Louisiana of old*," she says. "We are bringing more predictability and consistency to the regulatory process. When you have predictability and consistency, you get better economic development. Companies can look at our regulatory scheme and say, 'This is what I have to do,' and then go about the business of doing it."

Ask Edwards whether Louisiana will always rely on oil and gas and you do not get a neat slogan. You get a systems answer.

"You need a mix," she says. "The technology being developed around nuclear, for example, is phenomenal. You do not necessarily have to build the old version of a nuclear plant. There are other options. As the population grows, energy demand grows. People flick the switch and expect light. There is a whole chain behind that."

She is not naïve about risk. "There is nothing in life that does not carry risk," she says. "You get in your car and you do everything right, and someone runs a red light. The same is true in industry. There have been terrible incidents on rigs and platforms; people have died or been mangled. That is not 'good' and it is not 'okay,' but it is reality. The question is how you manage risk, not whether you can eliminate it."

What frustrates her most is not risk itself, but the stories people tell about it. "When people have myths, misinformation, and disinformation, they default to 'this is bad' or 'this is perfect.' Neither is true. Once people understand the tradeoffs, the conversation gets more productive."

When asked for a moment she is proud of, Edwards points to her time as Commissioner of Conservation.

"The Louisiana Purchase was about that great body of water I see every day from my office. If someone wants to buy water from Louisiana, that tells you what we are sitting on."

“There were regulatory situations that had been languishing for years,” she says. “I listened to staff, recognized we needed to act, and assessed penalties that were unheard of in that office. I was not being arbitrary or punitive. We have rules to protect the public. If you ignore them for years, there has to be a response that makes it clear this is not how we do business.”

She is matter-of-fact about the way life behaves. “Life happens. Things go sideways. You can sit in the corner and say, ‘Why me,’ or you can pivot,” she says. “We are here but for a blink. If you burn your energy fighting every slight, race or gender or otherwise, you will be too tired to fight when it really matters.”

Her original career plan, the one with the neatly drawn ladder, did not survive contact with reality.

“My goal out of law school was to be an insurance executive at Travelers,” she says. “That did not happen. I pivoted. Now, I ask a simpler question: does the work bring me joy? If you chase someone else’s idea of success, you may be working hard but you will never be happy. When you find the work you enjoy, even with the ups and downs, it stops feeling like ‘work.’ It feels like purpose.”

When pressed about legacy, she does not reach for grand speeches. “*Expanded opportunity. A love for my state and for the profession*.”

She still calls herself the same thing she did when we sat down: a country girl setting the world on fire. By the time lunch is over, the phrase means more than it did at the start.

It now contains a Black woman from St. James Parish who walked into rooms where no one expected her, refused to shrink to fit the box, learned to carry a shotgun and a regulatory code with equal ease, and has spent her career so far making sure Louisiana’s energy story includes not just power and profit, but water, wildlife, and the people who call the state home.

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