Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
Friday, 01 March 2013 09:34

Being a trailblazer is Micah Hines' legacy.

The age old debate of is it nature or nurture can be waged when discussing why Hines, who is the general counsel to Gov. Mark Dayton, so seemingly effortlessly has ascended to such heights as to become the first African-Americans to serve a Minnesota governor as general counsel. People can debate if she was nurtured by her parents and grandparents and thus acquired the tools of leadership and service, or was it by nature just supposed to be that way.

After all, Hines comes from an impressive bloodline.

The 35-year-old graduate of Duke University and the University of Michigan Law School is the great-grandchild of Lilly Carol Jackson, who was the president of the Baltimore branch of the NAACP for more than 30 years – a position that at the time was unique for a woman. Hines is the grandchild of Juanita Jackson, who was the first African-American woman to practice law in the state of Maryland. During Jackson's career as an attorney, Jackson – along with Thurgood Marshall – successfully tried cases that desegregated the public schools and public parks in Maryland.

"She was just a really wonderful grandmother," said Hines.

In 1937, Hines' grandfather, Clarence Mitchell, Jr. became the first director of the St. Paul Urban League. He later went on to found the youth branches of the NAACP. He served as the director of the NAACP's Washington D.C. bureau and is credited with the passage of much of the civil rights legislation to come out of the 1950s and 1960s. The civil rights organization annually presents youth with an award that is adorned with his name. President Jimmy Carter bestowed upon him the highest honor in the land for a civilian – the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

"My grandfather grew up very poor in a house in an alley that didn't have indoor plumbing," said Hines. "That just goes to show you, you never know where a child is going to end up in life."

If the accomplishments of Hines' grandparents weren't enough, Hines' uncle, Parren Mitchell, was the first African-American United States Congressman to serve the state of Maryland.

So, one could easily argue that it is nature that created Hines. One could argue that, but Hines would disagree. In fact, in Hines' nearly two hour meeting with Insight News, she humbly diverted much of the conversation about her accomplishments back to discussion of her family – her nurturing family.

"When I investigate where I come from, it makes sense that I do what I do," said Hines, who also served as president of the Black Student Alliance at Duke.

And what Hines has done – and is doing – is quite impressive. The soft-spoken, yet commanding presence that is Hines, has compiled quite a resume. Before serving as Dayton's general counsel, Hines was a trial attorney with Blackwell Burke, representing corporate clients such as Cargill, General Mills and 3M. In her time as a trial attorney, she tried more than 150 cases.

So, how did Hines land the coveted position of general counsel to the state's highest office? Really, it was quite simple, yet remarkable at the same time.
Hines, who moved to Minnesota with her husband, Daron Hines, was at an event attended by the governor. "I met the governor and I submitted an application to work with in his cabinet," said Hines. "I interviewed with several individuals and was eventually offered the position of assistant chief of staff."

Hines began working for Gov. Dayton on Feb. 7, 2011. By Aug. 10, 2011 – just six months and three days later – she was elevated to the position on general counsel. Hines was just 33 years old at time.

"I'll never forget the morning it became official," said Hines, with a bright smile on her face. "I got in the governor's car and he said, 'Good morning madam counselor.' I've been in the role ever since."

As general counsel, Hines is the chief attorney for the governor, lieutenant governor and the governor's office. That means any state matters that require legal advice or review must be seen by the effervescent eyes of Hines. She also serves as the governor's designee on the State Board of Investment (SBI), and as the governor's voice on the Executive Council and Land Exchange boards. The SBI is responsible for managing more that $62 billion in state retirement funds.

Furthering the nurture argument, the state's general counselor is quick to point out others who have mentored and assisted her in her journey to the top. Hines counts among her mentors, civil rights maven Dr. Josie Johnson and newly appointed state Supreme Court Justice Wilhelmina Wright.

And just as Hines said she has been helped along the way, she is eager to offer her time and talents to others – especially youth.

"I don't take my responsibility (to assist others) lightly," said Hines. "I'm very passionate about granting access. It's really bigger than me, because it's about opening doors for other people. You never know what a person can achieve. Every child has potential – don't give up on anyone."