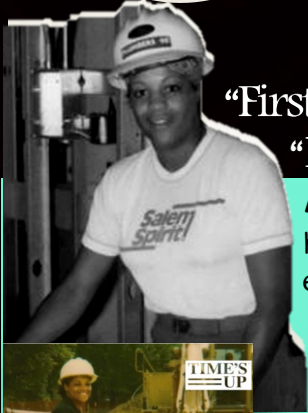


# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County Adrienne Bennett



(1954 - )  
"First African-American Woman Master Plumber in the United States"  
"First Woman Plumbing Inspector in the State of Michigan."

**Adrienne Bennett** was born in Chicago, Illinois. When she was nine years old, her family moved to Detroit, Michigan where she attended parochial school and excelled in math and science. As a child, she spent free time assembling aircraft and spaceship models. Her fascination with building and assembling led her to apply for an entry-level training program with an engineering firm in Detroit that would be a pathway into Lawrence Technology University, where she could study mechanical engineering. Adrienne dropped out of the program within a year after a racially charged encounter with a male student. She worked odd jobs, including advocating for people on public assistance programs, until a chance meeting at a 1976 Jimmy Carter election rally. A recruiter from the Mechanical Contractors Association of Detroit approached Adrienne with information about a federally-sponsored skilled trade apprenticeship program for minority women. At the age of 22, Adrienne took the admission test for the five-year apprenticeship program with the Plumbers' Union, Local 98, and passed.

The program was tough and when other female recruits dropped out, Adrienne endured, overcoming the challenges of working in extreme cold, driving two-hours each way for her first assignment and being the only woman on an all-male work-site. With each new level of success Adrienne earned, came a new level of hostility and harassment from her male counterparts. Even though she downplayed her appearance - wearing men's plaid shirts, work pants, a scarf covering her hair and no make-up or nail polish - verbal abuse and physical violations were a constant part of her training. In one incident, a male co-worker rushed her, lifting her off of the ground and pushing her into construction materials, causing her leg to bleed. Adrienne responded by throwing a large plumber's wrench at the man, splitting the back of his hard hat. The harassment ceased after that incident.

When she was finished, she became the first woman in Michigan to complete a plumbing apprenticeship program. In 1987, Adrienne had logged the 4,000 hours of experience required to qualify for the master plumber exam. She took the test and received her state license, becoming not only the first African-American female master plumber in the state of Michigan - but also in the United States. Michigan's Department of Labor recognized her historical achievement with a commemorative letter, praising her "unblemished record."



Adrienne and son, A.K. Bennett

In 2008, Adrienne Bennett opened her own company, Benkari, LLC - a commercial plumbing and water conservation business, with her son, A.K. Bennett. They were recently contracted by the Ford Motor Company to rebuild the historic and abandoned, Michigan Central Station in Detroit, Michigan. Adrienne remains the first and only African-American licensed female Master Plumber, (a title she's held for over 30 years) as well as a Certified Plumbing Contractor, Plumbing Inspector and Certified Medical Gas Inspector and Installer.

