

INTERVIEW: I've been listening, and problem-solving 'all my life' says new UN Ombudsman

With only eight days on the job so far, Shireen Dodson, the new United Nations [Ombudsman](#), brings with her a wealth of experience dealing with people from all walks of life, including setting up the first-ever Ombudsman office for the US State Department.

But her current career was not by design.

In an interview with UN News, she explained that after working for more than 20 years at the Washington-based cultural powerhouse, the Smithsonian Institution, she was about to retire when the State Department offered her a position as the Special Assistant to the Director of the Office of Civil Rights. In that role, each time someone called for an Ombudsman, it fell to her.

"It was in line with what I'd been doing all of my life, helping people and listening to people's problems" she said.

Ms. Dodson learned the fine art of mediation as a young child when she diplomatically negotiated between her divorced parents.

"Now mom, you have Thanksgiving dinner at two, and to my stepmom: Can you have Thanksgiving dinner at four?" she recounted to UN News with a smile, recalling two celebratory dinners that are all about the family.

During her time in the Civil Rights office, she went for training, got certified as a mediator and, four years later, was offered the job of Ombudsman.

We put our ear to the ground and we listen – *UN Ombudsman*

One of the things Ms. Dodson takes pride in from her years there, was that she "had as many managers coming, as I had staff," which illustrated that both staff and leadership saw the value of the office, and the way she handled the role.

Of her many challenges, the most difficult she said was "letting people know what an Ombudsman does," adding that her office was "the first place to start" with a problem.

"We put our ear to the ground and we listen, and we help people deal with workplace conflict," she said, noting that the Ombudsman helps people see what the issues are, so they can return to the workplace having come to some

understanding and resolution.

Operating under the four basic principles of confidentiality, informality, neutrality and independence, Ms. Dodson expressed the hope that her office would be an integral part of the Secretary-General's reform efforts, commenting that she had arrived at "a perfect time, [during] lots of change," saying "I think I can really assist."

While many may wonder why ombudsman is an acceptable term for a woman, Ms. Dodson explained that it's a question of language: it's a Swedish term.

"It's hard enough for someone to understand what an ombudsman is, versus an ombudsperson and an ombudswoman," she argued, saying that in her view, it is a gender-neutral title.

Although a "take charge" sort of person, Ms. Dodson stressed that she is not "a bull in a china closet," and that for the first 100 days she planned to "listen and learn" and to then see what she can add to the Organization's existing tools.

The Ombudsman concluded with this message to the thousands of UN staff members around the world: "We are here, open for business, come early, don't wait until the problem festers."