

2023 Regular Session

SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 59

BY SENATOR DUPLESSIS

COMMENDATIONS. Commends and congratulates retired Chief Justice Bernette J. Johnson on the occasion of her 80th birthday and for a distinguished legal career.

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A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

To commend and congratulate, Louisiana Supreme Court's 25th Chief Justice, retired Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson on the occasion of her eightieth birthday and for a distinguished trail-blazing legal career in service to Louisiana.

WHEREAS, Bernette J. Johnson was born June 17, 1943, in Donaldsonville, Louisiana; and

WHEREAS, when the family moved to New Orleans, Louisiana, Bernette attended segregated public schools and graduated valedictorian of her class in 1960 from Walter L. Cohen Senior High School; and

WHEREAS, she attended Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, on an academic scholarship, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1964 and eventually an Honorary Doctorate in Law in 2001 from Spelman College; and

WHEREAS, she was one of the first two African-American women to graduate from the Paul M. Hebert Law Center at Louisiana State University (LSU), receiving her Juris Doctorate degree in 1969; she was inducted into the LSU Law Center's Hall of Fame in 1996 when her portrait was unveiled, and eventually named an Honorary Inductee into the LSU Order of the Coif; and

WHEREAS, Chief Justice Johnson has worked as an advocate for social justice, civil

1 rights, fairness, equity, for providing legal assistance to the poor, and served as a community
2 organizer for most of her life; and

3 WHEREAS, after receiving her Juris Doctorate degree, Chief Justice Johnson spent
4 much of her legal career working in the public sector: she served as a managing attorney
5 with the New Orleans Legal Assistance Corporation; a Deputy City Attorney for the city of
6 New Orleans; a law intern with the Civil Rights Division of the United States Justice
7 Department in Washington, D.C.; and as a community organizer with the NAACP Legal
8 Defense and Educational Fund in New York City; and

9 WHEREAS, Chief Justice Johnson's trail-blazing judicial career began in 1984, when
10 she was elected to the Orleans Parish Civil District Court, becoming the first woman to hold
11 that position, and in 1994 upon achieving seniority, gained the position of chief judge of that
12 court; and

13 WHEREAS, as a civil trial judge, Justice Johnson was first assigned to the Domestic
14 Relations Court, where she established a system to refer alimony, child support issues, and
15 custody to mediation prior to court appearances and provided that such mediation be
16 available to needy families based on a sliding scale system for payment of fees; and

17 WHEREAS, Chief Justice Johnson's next trail-blazing judicial move occurred when
18 she was elected to serve on the Louisiana Supreme Court in 1994 as an associate justice and
19 in 2013 was sworn in as Chief Justice for the court, becoming the first African-American
20 woman to serve as both an associate justice and chief justice on the Louisiana Supreme
21 Court; and

22 WHEREAS, she served on the Louisiana Supreme Court's Judicial Council; the
23 Court's Legal Services Task Force; worked with the National Campaign on Best Practices
24 in the area of Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Court, worked closely with the Court's
25 Mandatory Continuing Legal Education Committee, and the Committee on Bar Admissions;
26 she also championed many successful initiatives: including the training and certification of
27 the Limited English Proficiency Interpreters in the courts, and the implementation of an
28 electronic filing system for the Louisiana Supreme Court; and

29 WHEREAS, in recognition of her judicial acumen, she received the prestigious Joan
30 Dempsey Klein Award (2013) and the Lady Justice Award (2020) from the National

1 Association of Women Judges; the 2010 Spirit of Excellence Award from the Commission
2 on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession from the American Bar Association; she
3 was inducted into the National Bar Association's Hall of Fame in 2010; and the Louisiana
4 State Bar Association Board of Governors unanimously voted to combine the Trailblazer and
5 Human Rights Awards into the aptly named, "Louisiana State Bar Association Chief Justice
6 Bernette Joshua Johnson Trailblazer Award" in 2016; and

7 WHEREAS, she received the Louisiana Legislative Women's Caucus Foundation
8 "2013 Women of Excellence Award" which recognizes and honors extraordinary women of
9 excellence across the state for their outstanding achievements and contributions; and

10 WHEREAS, Chief Justice Johnson's scholarly pursuits included serving as an
11 Adjunct Faculty member teaching Trial Advocacy at Tulane University Law School, and
12 serving as an Adjunct Professor at Southern University in New Orleans teaching Legal
13 Terminology and Business Law; she also published many editorials, essays, legal opinions,
14 and other scholarly works throughout her career receiving numerous awards from national,
15 state, and local organizations; and

16 WHEREAS, Chief Justice Johnson has been actively involved in serving the
17 community in such ways as: serving as the Executive Committee Member of the National
18 Alumnae Association of Spelman College, Chair of the New Orleans Chapter of the
19 Southern Christian Leadership Conference, member of the Martin Luther King National
20 Holiday Planning Committee, member of the Board of Directors of the Young Women
21 Christian Association, and as a Life Member of the NAACP; and

22 WHEREAS, she also serves the community by frequently speaking to legal,
23 academic, and community groups; and

24 WHEREAS, Chief Johnson upon retiring from the Supreme Court on December 31,
25 2020, when asked to describe her legacy said, "she hoped to be remembered for applying the
26 law with fairness, turning a nonbiased eye to each case that came before her, treating all with
27 dignity and respect, and shining a light on the problems of mass incarceration in Louisiana.";
28 and

29 WHEREAS, recently the Louisiana Supreme Court officially renamed its museum
30 to the "Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson Supreme Court Museum" in tribute to Chief

