

SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 59

BY SENATOR DUPLESSIS

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

WHEREAS, after receiving her Juris Doctorate degree, Chief Justice Johnson spent much of her legal career working in the public sector: she served as a managing attorney with the New Orleans Legal Assistance Corporation; a Deputy City Attorney for the city of

New Orleans; a law intern with the Civil Rights Division of the United States Justice Department in Washington, D.C.; and as a community organizer with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in New York City; and

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

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

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

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

WHEREAS, in recognition of her judicial acumen, she received the prestigious Joan Dempsey Klein Award (2013) and the Lady Justice Award (2020) from the National Association of Women Judges; the 2010 Spirit of Excellence Award from the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession from the American Bar Association; she was inducted into the National Bar Association's Hall of Fame in 2010; and the Louisiana State Bar Association Board of Governors unanimously voted to combine the Trailblazer and Human Rights Awards into the aptly named, "Louisiana State Bar Association Chief Justice

Bernette Joshua Johnson Trailblazer Award" in 2016; and

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

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

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

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

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

WHEREAS, recently the Louisiana Supreme Court officially renamed its museum to the "Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson Supreme Court Museum" in tribute to Chief Justice Johnson which includes the portraits of all 25 Chief Justices who have presided over the court, a replica of the building, and many other historical exhibits; and

WHEREAS, Chief Justice Johnson juggled family obligations throughout her legal ordeal with a marriage and two living children: a son, David who is an accountant living in Atlanta, and a daughter, Rachael who is a judge on the Fourth Circuit bench; and

WHEREAS, when asked about how she will spend her retirement years, Chief Justice Johnson stated, "I've been a lawyer for over fifty years, a judge for thirty-six years including twenty-six at the Supreme Court, and a Chief Justice for almost eight years; it has been a privilege to serve the citizens of the great state of Louisiana; I intend to see what retirement is like before going on to new challenges."; and

WHEREAS, despite stating the above, she vows to stay involved with several organizations, including the National Bar Association composed of Black judges and lawyers that focuses on judicial reform, fairness, justice, and mentorship during her retirement years; and

WHEREAS, Chief Justice Bernette J. Johnson merits a sincere and heartfelt measure of commendation for her dedication to excellence and all the outstanding accomplishments she has achieved during her eighty years of life.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Legislature of Louisiana does hereby 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.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that a copy of this Resolution be transmitted to retired Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Bernette J. Johnson.

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PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE

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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES