

Legislature honors African-American women judges

April 13, 2012

The Mississippi Legislature recently honored the state's first African-American women judges. The concurrent resolution recognized Hinds County Chancellors Denise Owens and Patricia Wise, Fourth District Circuit Judge Betty W. Sanders, Sixth District Circuit Judge Lillie Blackmon Sanders, and Court of Appeals Judge Ermea J. Russell.

House Concurrent Resolution 50, introduced by Rep. Alyce Griffin Clarke and co-sponsored by 20 other representatives, said, "Honoring the achievements of the first African-American female judges in Mississippi is commendable evidence of the progression toward equality in this state."

The judges were recognized at the Capitol on Feb. 21. The resolution was adopted by the House on Feb. 21 and by the Senate Feb. 24.

Judge Wise said, "We were so happy to be honored, not so much for ourselves, but for young women, the next generation. When we go out and talk to seventh and eighth graders, for them to know that opportunity is there for them is what is so important to me."

Judge Wise and Judge Owens have helped organize and present an annual program which introduces female middle school students to legal and other careers.

"It was very emotional," Judge Lillie Sanders said.

She became the first African-American woman to serve on the state trial bench in February 1989, when former Gov. Ray Mabus appointed her to an unexpired term in the Sixth Circuit District. She was elected to the circuit bench in 1994. Chancellors Owens and Wise were elected in a special election in 1989. Gov. Mabus appointed Judge Betty Sanders in 1989 as a special magistrate at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. She was elected to a Fourth Circuit judgeship in 1994. Judge Russell became the first African-American woman to serve on the Mississippi Court of Appeals on May 20, 2011. Gov. Haley Barbour appointed her to a vacancy.

Judge Russell, of Flora, was previously appointed to the Hinds County Circuit Court, where she served 1998-1999. She served as a senior trial attorney for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 1999-2007. She also served as Secretary of the Mississippi Senate, chief counsel to Lt. Gov. Eddie Briggs and Assistant Commissioner of Intercultural Relations at the state Institutions of Higher Learning. Judge Russell has served in the U.S. Army Reserve since 1973. She is a veteran of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Judge Lillie Sanders, of Natchez, is a former municipal judge and youth court public defender. She presides over a Drug Court. She serves on the Board of Directors of the Mississippi Association of Drug Court Professionals and the Access to Justice Commission.

Judge Betty Sanders, of Greenwood, presides over a Drug Court. She served on the State Drug Court Advisory Committee and as an officer of the Mississippi Association of Drug Court Professionals. She is former chair of the Conference of Circuit Judges. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project. She served on the Commission on Judicial Performance, the Complaint Tribunal and Ethics Committee of the Mississippi Bar. She was inducted as a Fellow of the Mississippi Bar Foundation in 2006.

Judge Owens has served as co-chair of the Access to Justice Commission since 2006. She was president of the Conference of Chancery Judges. She served on the Task Force on Gender Fairness.

Judge Wise is former chair of the Commission on Judicial Performance. She has served as a member of the Complaint Tribunal and the Ethics Committee of the Mississippi Bar.

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