

Judge Anna Diggs Taylor

1932-2017



Retired Chief U.S. District Judge Anna Diggs Taylor, a civil rights champion and groundbreaking lawyer and judge, died Saturday in Grosse Pointe Woods following a brief illness. She was 84.

Court employees remembered Judge Taylor with a moment of silence at Monday's Employee Appreciation Day and her former colleagues reminisced about her during their monthly meeting at the Theodore Levin U.S. Courthouse in Detroit.

"She was an all-around beautiful person," Judge Hood said. "She was gracious and kind, but not in a way that allowed herself to be diminished by people because she was a woman or a minority."

Judge Taylor was born Anna Katherine Johnston in 1932 in Washington, D.C. Her father, Virginius Douglass Johnston, was the treasurer of Howard University. Her mother, Hazel Bramlette Johnston, was a homemaker and a business teacher.

After completing the ninth grade in the District's segregated school system, Judge Taylor's parents enrolled her at the prestigious Northfield School for Girls in East Northfield, Mass., to prepare her for a legal career. Northfield was one of the few schools that accepted black students. She graduated in 1950.

Judge Taylor obtained her Bachelor's Degree from Barnard College at Columbia University in New York in 1954 and a law degree from Yale in 1957 – one of only five women in her graduating law class.

Afterward, Judge Taylor landed a job as a staff lawyer in the Solicitor's Office of the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington with the help of J. Ernest Wilkins – then assistant Secretary of Labor, the first black person appointed to a subcabinet post, and a friend of her father's.

"I'd be unemployed today if it hadn't been for that man," Judge Taylor told the Michigan Bar Journal in a 1984 interview.

In Washington, Judge Taylor met Charles Diggs Jr., an up and coming Michigan congressman and the son of a prominent Detroit mortician. They married in 1960, moved to Detroit and eventually had two children.

From 1961-62, Judge Taylor worked as an assistant Wayne County Prosecutor.

In 1964, she went to Mississippi with other lawyers to represent civil rights workers jailed for registering black people to vote.

The day she got there, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, vanished near Philadelphia, Miss., Judge Taylor, her brother, a law student and George Crockett Jr., the eventual Congressman, went to the Neshoba County Courthouse to ask about the disappearance, which made news nationwide.

The sheriff, who later was implicated in the men's deaths, was less than helpful, the Detroit Free Press wrote in a 2006 profile about Judge Taylor. As she and her companions returned to their cars, they were confronted by angry whites who hurled racial slurs at them.

"We were afraid we were going to be killed," Taylor said of the incident.

In 1966, Taylor served as an assistant U.S. attorney in Detroit, but left the next year to run her husband's Detroit congressional office. From 1970-75, she worked in a private practice.

In the mid-1970s, after the breakup of her marriage, Judge Taylor worked on State Sen. Coleman Young's successful campaign to become Detroit's first black mayor. In 1975, Young asked her to join the city's Law Department to help him integrate city government.

The next year, she married S. Martin Taylor, then director of the Michigan Employment Security Commission, and worked on Jimmy Carter's successful Democratic presidential campaign.

In 1979, Carter nominated her for the U.S. District Court bench in Detroit. She was the first black female federal district judge in the U.S. 6th Circuit, which includes Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee.

In the years that followed, Judge Taylor presided over a series of high-profile cases and served as chief judge of the court in 1997-98.

Judge Taylor took senior status in January 1999 and retired in in January 2011.

Judge Taylor served as a trustee of several organizations including the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit Receiving Hospital, the Henry Ford Hospital System, the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan and Community Foundation of Michigan. She was elected vice president of the Yale Law School Association.

Her many awards include the National Bar Association Women Lawyer's Division Award for 1981, Sojourner Truth Award of the National Negro Business and Professional

Women of 1986, the Wolverine Bar Association's Bench-Bar Award of 1990 and an honorary Doctor of Laws from Marygrove College in 2001.

She is survived by her husband, S. Martin Taylor, of Grosse Pointe Farms; son Douglass Johnston Diggs (Shauna) of Grosse Pointe; daughter Carla Diggs Smith (Stephen) of Kensington, MD; brother Lowell Douglass Johnston (Frances) of New York; and four grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, Jan. 6, 2018, at 11 a.m. at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, 4800 Woodward Ave., Detroit.

In lieu of flowers, the family recommended that gifts may be made to the Community Foundation of Southeastern Michigan. You may obtain a gift form at <https://cfsem.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Mail-In-Gift-Form-v2.pdf>.