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Hamilton Remembered as Compassionate Judge Who 'Set the Standard'

Former District of Columbia Superior Court Chief Judge Eugene Hamilton, who rose from the segregated South, was remembered Wednesday by friends and colleagues as a man with unending compassion for the city's youth during a period of soaring crime rates and administrative upheaval.

At a memorial for Hamilton in the H. Carl Moultrie I courthouse, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder Jr., who tried several cases before Hamilton when he served as the U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia, recalled his patient yet firm courtroom demeanor.

"For me and for so many members of the bench and bar who are here today, he didn't just set a fine example. He set the standard," Holder said. "Then and now he stands as a model of what it means to be a true advocate for and defender of justice."

Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.) recalled how Hamilton was able to meld his personal values into his life on the bench during "some of the most turbulent," high-crime years for the district, working to create a court more responsive to issues like juvenile crime and domestic abuse.

"Those were the years of 400-plus homicides. Those were the years the Superior Court needed and found" a leader, Norton said. "He loved the court almost as much as the people who came through it."

During his tenure as a judge, which spanned more than four decades, from 1970 through his death on Nov. 19, 2011, Hamilton was known as an advocate for the city's youth, creating a program for nonviolent juvenile offenders called the Urban Services Corps that offered job training alongside strict supervision. He also pioneered a revolutionary domestic violence unit, which former Superior Court Chief Judge Rufus King hailed as one of the first like it in the nation.

Hamilton, who died at 78, served as Superior Court's chief judge from 1993-2000. He resided in Brookeville, Md.

Outside of the courtroom, Hamilton and his wife Virginia opened their doors, time and time again, to the city's youth, offering a temporary home to more than 40 foster children and adopting four. Terri Gale, who worked as a law clerk for Hamilton from 1977 to 1978, recalled

Hamilton's conflicted feelings when sentencing young people he knew to be victims of past abuse.

"It was a difficult moment for a man who cared so much for young people," Gale said.

Charles Ogletree, a Harvard Law professor and director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, lent a lighter tone to the memorial as he recalled the judge's humor in a case involving a 70-year-old woman convicted of killing another elderly person. Facing a sentence of 15 years to life, the woman pleaded with Hamilton for leniency as she feared her health problems would end her life in prison.

"And he said, 'You don't have to do 15 years to life – just do as much as you can,'" Ogletree said to laughter from the crowd.

U.S. District Judge for the D.C. Circuit Emmett Sullivan choked back tears when he spoke about a funeral service he attended with Hamilton for a murdered juvenile at the request of the pastor, who feared retaliatory violence would erupt. At the church, the pair found that many of the young people in attendance never had a positive male role model.

"We spoke to a lot of kids, we hugged a lot of kids, we cried with a lot of kids that day," he said.

Sullivan also recalled an interview he had with Hamilton for a clerkship early in his legal career. When he entered the judge's chambers, Sullivan saw that Hamilton was still wearing his robes, having just come from the courtroom. While the position had already been filled, Hamilton sat down with Sullivan and offered him advice about his future legal career.

"That very positive image left me with something to dream about – maybe one day I could be a judge," Sullivan said.

Posted by [Rob Stigile](#) on March 08, 2012