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DC Superior Court Mourns the Loss of MJ Robinson

Arlene L. Robinson, a former D.C. Superior Court Magistrate Judge and Chair of the Court's Commission on Mental Health, died on October 26 at the Washington Hospice in the District. She was 72.

"Arlene was a quiet, forceful and tireless advocate for children, families and vulnerable adults as an attorney, as a magistrate judge and as a long-time resident of Washington," said Judge Lee F. Satterfield, Chief Judge of the D.C. Superior Court. "Her work transformed the way that the most vulnerable in the District experience justice."

Appointed to the Superior Court in 1994, Judge Robinson chaired the Mental Health Commission – which includes psychologists and psychiatrists. The commission determines whether mentally ill persons met the criteria for commitment to the mental health system including inpatient commitments to St. Elizabeths Hospital.

"What I remember most about Arlene was her presence and attitude that made such a difference. She appeared as a vibrant competent, "street-smart" black woman who conveyed a 'we will all be responsible here' attitude," said Dr. Ted Beal, a member of the Commission before and after Judge Robinson's appointment. "We (the Commission) had been a functional group of older white men. When Arlene became chair, the functioning of the commission just changed. She could say things that none of us could say and the fact that she did made us all better persons. Meetings were quicker, more efficient. People were more candid and honest in their comments. The commission just worked better."

Judge Robinson, who also presided over criminal arraignments and family court cases, retired in 2002. She continued to serve the community, her profession and her family while also enjoying retirement, according to her husband William (Bill) Robinson, founding dean of the UDC-David A. Clarke School of Law. Avid bridge players, the couple travelled regularly. He said she loved dancing and playing scrabble with her sisters, and her dinner parties were legendary. Most importantly, he said, she was able to spend time with her four grandchildren while continuing her longstanding involvement in improving the plight of the city's children, families and the mentally ill even after she was diagnosed with gall bladder cancer in August 2010.

Born on December 21, 1938, Judge Robinson was a graduate of Dunbar High School. After graduating from D.C. Teacher's College in 1964, she joined the Peace Corps and taught in Ethiopia. When she returned to the United States, she enrolled in the Education Masters' Program at the Teachers' College, Columbia University. She completed the program in 1967 and taught in junior high school and junior colleges in New York before returning to the District with her husband and their eldest daughter. She taught at the University of the District of Columbia before enrolling at the Howard University School of Law.

After graduation from law school in 1979, Judge Robinson joined the D.C. Office of Corporation Counsel, now the District's Office of the Attorney General. Her colleagues recalled her passion for children and families, and her ability to use that passion to improve the legal processes involving child support, neglected and abused children, domestic violence and elder abuse victims. To that end, Judge Robinson proposed to then Corporation Counsel John Payton that the office combine all legal services for children and families together in one division. John Payton recalled that her concept was appropriate, well thought-out and was destined to improve the legal services for those in crisis.

"You could not imagine someone more dedicated to the welfare of the children and families that we had responsibility for," said Payton, currently President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., in New York. "She was unrelenting and unbelievably focused on her responsibilities to those who were living under stress."

According to former colleagues, her mantra was: "How can we do this differently?" At the Office of the Corporation Counsel, she used that question to suspend the annual office Christmas party in favor of a party for the children who were involved in cases in the Family Services Division. "This year we decided that we should have a party for our own 'kids,'" she told a Washington Post reporter as scores of children and their caretakers enjoyed food, gifts and a chance to talk with Santa Claus.

"Personally, Arlene was an inspiration," said Judge Anna Blackburne-Rigsby. "Her passion and commitment was real, and filled with warmth that radiated throughout the office. She cared deeply about how neglect and abuse and child support cases were handled from a legal perspective, and she worked to consolidate and focus resources. She was the driving force that brought legal services under one umbrella in the office and it made a difference."

Her sensitivity to the needs of children did not stop at the door to government offices or the courthouse, said Judge Blackburne-Rigsby, a former colleague at the Office of Corporation Counsel and the Superior Court. In the early 1990s, while Deputy Director at Corporation Counsel, Judge Robinson created what is believed to be the first public agency partnership with a D.C. public school. Her creativity was evident in the regular productions of the Trial of Gold E Locks at Walker Jones Elementary School that continued for 10 years. The children were assigned roles as witnesses, attorneys and jurors assisted by volunteers from her office. After her retirement, Judge Robinson coordinated a similar program for

students from H.D. Cooke Elementary School with colleagues from the Judicial Council of the Washington Bar Association, of which she was a founder.

In 1993, she was one of the founders of the District of Columbia's Safe Shores Children's Advocacy Center, which created a multidisciplinary team approach to forensic investigations of child abuse and neglect under executive order of Mayor Sharon Pratt-Kelly. After Judge Robinson's retirement from the Court, she continued her involvement as a member of the Board of Directors until 2010.

A specialist on local and national child support legal issues, she was elected President of the Eastern Region Interstate Child Support Association after serving on the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Child Support and the District's Child Support Guidelines Committee, which was established in the early 1990s when new laws changed the way child support obligations were calculated.

In 2006, she was appointed to the District of Columbia Board of Social Work, and served as Acting Chair until 2010. She also served as an independent contractor for the Justice Department's Public Safety Officers Benefits Program.

Judge Robinson dedicated many years to the development and growth of the Mental Health Association of the District of Columbia, whose mission is to ensure quality and appropriate services for mentally ill residents.

A life-long member of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, she worked with District congregations to sponsor workshops for the elderly to complete powers of attorney and health care directives. Judge Robinson and her sister, Brenda Durrington, also lead Junior Church for the children of the congregation for many years. She was an active member and leader in the Interdenominational Church Ushers Association, the Potomac Valley Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, and the Judicial Council of the Washington Bar Association.

Judge Robinson is survived by William, her husband of 44 years; daughters, Anne Elizabeth Robinson of New York, NY, and Cynthia Robinson-Rivers of Washington, DC, and a son, Reginald Robinson of Washington, DC; four grandchildren, two sisters and one brother.

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