



THE STERLING JOHNSON NEW YORK CHAPTER OF THE NATIONAL BLACK PROSECUTORS ASSOCIATION

April 21, 2017

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Dear NBPA family,

On behalf of the executive board of the Sterling Johnson New York City chapter of the National Black Prosecutors Association, I regret to inform you of the passing of one of our most esteemed judges.

New York's sparkling legal community shines less brightly this season in the wake of the tragic loss of one of its brilliant stars. Sadly, Justice Sheila Abdus-Salaam was found dead on April 12, 2017, not far from her Harlem home. Justice Abdus-Salaam became the first black woman to join the New York State Court of Appeals in its 270 year history when Governor Cuomo appointed her to the state's highest court in 2013. Upon learning of her death, the Governor praised her as "a trailblazing jurist whose life in public service was in pursuit of a more fair and more just New York for all." Perhaps most fittingly, he went on to call her "a force for good."

Born Sheila Turner, she was one of seven children raised by working class parents in Washington, D.C., where she attended public school. A gifted student, she was admitted to Barnard College, where she graduated in 1974, and went on to attend Columbia University's Law School, along with friend and future attorney general Eric Holder, graduating in 1977.

Committed to public service from the very beginning of her legal career, after graduation she joined Brooklyn Legal Services as a staff attorney. Thereafter, she served as an Assistant Attorney General in the New York State Department of Law, Civil Rights and Real Estate Financing Bureaus (1980-1988), where one of her career highlights was winning an anti-discrimination lawsuit for 30 female bus drivers who had been denied promotions. As the lead attorney on the case, she convinced the trial judge to rule that the New York Transit Authority must make promotions based on merit, not seniority, and order the Authority to hold Civil Service Exams for coveted dispatcher jobs. At the time, 1981, there were about 9,000 bus drivers in the city, of which only 30 were women. Most of these women lacked seniority because they had only been hired after a minimum height

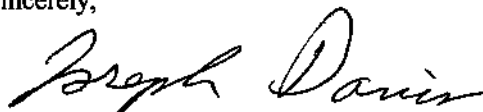
requirement of 5 feet 4 inches was dropped in 1976. Before taking the bench, Justice Abdus-Salaam also served as General Counsel for the New York City Office of Labor Services (1988-1991).

In 1991, she was elected to the New York City Civil Court. From there she went on to be elected to the State Supreme Court, which is the trial level court in New York. Former Governor David Patterson appointed her to the Appellate Division, First Department, one of the state's intermediate appellate courts, in 2009. Four years later, in 2013, she was nominated and confirmed as an Associate Justice of New York's highest court, the Court of Appeals.

A liberal voice on the state's high court, she penned several decisions of great significance. These include People v. Peques, 22 N.Y.3d 168 (2013), which expanded the duty of trial judges to inform noncitizen criminal defendants of the possibility of deportation before accepting a guilty plea. In People v. Bridgeforth, 28 N.Y.3d 567 (2016), writing for the Court, she held that discrimination based on skin color, just like discrimination based on race, violated the State constitution. And, in Matter of Brooke S.B. v. Elizabeth A. C.C., and Matter of Estrellita A. v. Jennifer D., 28 N.Y.3d 192 (2016), she "expanded" the legal definition of "parent" beyond the traditional model of a female mother and a male father in light of the increasing prevalence of non-traditional couples and of the 2011 legalization of same-sex marriage in New York. This ruling established that former same-sex partners of biological parents could assert child visitation rights.

In addition to these legal achievements, Adbus-Salaam was an active member of many professional and civic organizations. These included the Metropolitan Black Bar Association, Association of Black Women Attorney's, Columbia Alumni, and Columbia's Black Alumni Council. She had also been a proud resident of Harlem for more than 30 years. Described by many as a "young" 65, her sudden death has shocked many New Yorkers. She leaves behind a husband, many relatives, friends and colleagues. A champion for justice and a friend to many, her brilliance and spirit will be sorely missed.

Sincerely,



Joseph Davis
President
Sterling Johnson New York Chapter
of The National Black Prosecutors Association