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Remembering the Hon. Viola J. Taliaferro

by joboyd

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Judge Viola J. Taliaferro, a pathbreaking jurist in Monroe County and renowned advocate for its children, passed away Monday, June 12 in Bloomington.

A 1977 graduate of the Indiana University Maurer School of Law, Taliaferro entered the legal profession later in life, but wasted no time making an immediate—and lasting—impact on her local community.

By the time she entered law school at the age of 44, Taliaferro had already led a successful career in public service. She graduated high school at the age of 14, and by the time she was 19 she’d already earned an undergraduate degree from Virginia State University. Taliaferro took work as a Supervisor of Admissions at Tuskegee Institute of Alabama right out of college, then with the Howard University Medical School. She followed her husband George’s historic career (he was the first African American drafted by a National Football League team) as a professional football player to Dallas, Los Angeles, and Baltimore, where she became a teacher and administrator with the Baltimore Public School system.

Viola J. Taliaferro addresses the Moot Court Room during the naming ceremony of the Viola J. Taliaferro Family and Children’s Mediation Clinic on October 4, 2008.
Viola Taliaferro earned a Master of Liberal Arts degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1969. By then she and George had four children, and the family returned to Bloomington—where George had played for the Indiana University Hoosier football team—in 1972.

Three years later she enrolled at the Law School. She went directly into private practice after earning her JD, focusing on family and criminal law. Taliaferro was named a Monroe Circuit Court Magistrate in 1989, and was appointed judge of the Monroe Circuit Court VII in 1995—a position she held until she retired in 2004.

It was on the bench where Taliaferro truly shined, where she could be as strict and comforting as a southern grandma. Those who appeared before her were used to being scolded for having done something to have to show up before a juvenile judge. But behind the serious comments was a serious care and concern for their wellbeing and their future.

“She could dress them down, but she always respected the kids who found themselves in her court,” recalled Maryann Williams, a local attorney who worked with the judge for decades. “She believed all children should be heard, that there was always a story behind why they had run into trouble.”

That combination of sternness and empathy left lasting impressions on those she helped.

“We could not go out shopping without running into someone who would tell her that she saved their life, or that she was there for them when they needed it,” Williams said.

In 2008, the Law School named its Family and Children Mediation Clinic in Taliaferro’s honor. Amy Applegate led the clinic for many years and developed a close relationship with the judge after arriving in Indiana in 1998.

“I knew immediately she was the most extraordinary judge I’d ever meet,” Applegate said. “She had a great legal mind and cared so much for children and their families. Even when she ruled against a child’s parents, everyone understood why. She was one of our brightest stars.”

The first time Williams met Taliaferro, Williams was clerking with a local law firm and Taliaferro was a practicing attorney. Williams went with one of her colleagues to a deposition in Taliaferro’s office. It was Columbus Day, and the courts were closed.

“I’d never met her before,” Williams said. “But I was so enamored with her, that I remember leaving her office and then feeling something pull me back. She said ‘I knew you were going to come back.’”

The two spoke at length, and Taliaferro offered her a job as a clerk for her.

But what made her turn back that day?
“There was just something about her,” Williams said. “I wish I could put my finger on it. It was her advocacy, the way she asked questions in her depositions.”

Taliaferro ended up helping Williams study for the Bar exam, and was there when she passed it.

“She pushed me to do things I never thought I could do,” Williams recalled. “She was always pushing to make sure you were better.”

After Taliaferro was appointed to the bench, Williams took on many of her former clients.

“I asked them all, ‘What is it about Vi that makes her so special?’” Williams said.

“They said, ‘When she was fighting for us, it didn’t even matter if we won or lost. It was that she was fighting for us at all.’

Judge Taliaferro was 94.