

Minnesota honors Juanita Jackson Mitchell

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Dignitaries and well-wishers alike packed the State Capitol Rotunda to celebrate and honor the works of civil rights pioneer Juanita Jackson Mitchell.

The ceremony, which took place on Wednesday (May 8), was to showcase the traveling exhibit inside the Capitol that highlights the many great works and accomplishments of the late Mitchell. The event brought out the governor; several state Supreme Court Justices, legislators and a host of others, including another civil rights legend, Dr. Josie Johnson. Johnson said Mitchell's works, particularly as a young person, need to be exhausted.

"In 1935 a newspaper said this about Juanita, who was then Ms. Jackson. It said, 'Ms. Jackson will join the national staff of the NAACP where she will continue her work with the youth,'" said Johnson. "Now keep in mind she had been engaged in the movement already for five years. The point I'm trying to make is we need for us – and particularly our young people – to return to that type of engagement."

Indeed Mitchell was a tireless and staunch advocate for civil rights; and her many accomplishments paved the way for generations to follow. An 18-year-old graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Mitchell was the first African-American woman to attend law school at the University of Maryland and was the first African-American woman to practice law in the state of Maryland. Along with Thurgood Marshall, the two filed lawsuits that desegregated the Baltimore public schools. Later Mitchell founded the Youth NAACP.

A former resident of St. Paul, Mitchell was the president of the city's NAACP branch. During that time, her husband, Clarence Mitchell, Jr., was the executive director of the St. Paul Urban League. President Jimmy Carter would later honor him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom – the highest honor awarded to a civilian.

In 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Juanita Jackson Mitchell to the White House Conference on Children; in 1963 President Kennedy appointed her to the White House Conference on Women and Civil Rights and in 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson would appoint her to the White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights, which focused on finding solutions concerning economic security, education and justice for African-Americans.

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"In celebrating (Mitchell's) legacy, we are challenged to look around as our professions, our institutions and our society to identify who is not present, who faces legal and social barriers to the full participation in society; and after doing so, we must renew our commitment to opening the door of opportunity for others," said state Supreme Court Justice Wilhelmina Wright. "She had the audacity to envision freedom *and* equality for herself and her children. It is that kind of vision, the vision to see beyond her reality that Mrs. Mitchell put to work in her service to others."

Wright made headlines this past year when she became the first African-American to be appointed by a governor to the state's High Court.

The event was put together in part by Mitchell's granddaughter, Micah Hines. Hines is general counsel to Gov. Mark Dayton, and is the first African-American to serve as the state's chief legal head.

"We have an opportunity to celebrate our history, but we also have an opportunity to look to our future," said Hines.

The exhibit, on loan from Roland Park Country School in Baltimore, will be on display inside the Capitol until May 14.