

NEWS RELEASE

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LEGAL SERVICES' 2019 MAJOR AWARDS EVENT HIGHLIGHTS TWO LAWMAKERS AND THE MEMORIES OF TWO NEW JERSEY LEGAL LUMINARIES

EDISON — On Monday, June 3, Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) is bestowing its highest recognition, induction into its Equal Justice Circle of Honor, upon two of New Jersey's most prominent lawmakers — U. S. Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman and NJ majority leader Sen. Loretta Weinberg — for their efforts over many years to secure greater legal, social and economic justice.

The same prestigious recognition also will be presented posthumously to two of New Jersey's legal luminaries, the late New Jersey Supreme Court Chief Justice Robert N. Wilentz and the late New Jersey Attorney General Robert Del Tufo, who also served as U. S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey.

In announcing the event to be held at the Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton Township, LSNJ President Melville D. Miller Jr. highlighted the achievements of the recipients, as well as about 150 law firms, corporations and attorneys who will be recognized for their major *pro bono* services in helping the disadvantaged, but emphasized that much more needs to be done.

“Our state and nation continues to confront a pervasive denial of equal justice in civil legal matters for those who cannot afford attorneys,” he said, noting that there are no attorneys available for over 90 percent of the civil legal problems confronting New Jersey's poor residents. “A fundamental promise of our democracy — equal justice under the law — is mere myth for most living in poverty.”

In addition to the Circle of Honor awards to Watson Coleman, Weinberg, Wilentz and Del Tufo, special awards will be presented to Christopher J. Stracco, former chairperson for the IOLTA Fund of the Bar of New Jersey; State Sens. Sandra B. Cunningham and Declan J. O'Scanlon Jr.; and Suzanne M. McSorley and the Princeton Internships in Civic Service.

Miller observed, "Through their work these recipients each have contributed enormously to securing greater justice and a more civil society, with special concern for those living in poverty." He added, "Most significantly, they not only spoke of their commitment but clearly lived it."

That certainly applied to the four recipients of The Circle of Honor awards. In her 2014 election to the House of Representatives, Watson Coleman became the first African American woman from New Jersey to become a member of the House. Earlier the Mercer County Democrat served many years in the State Assembly, including four years as the majority leader, a position never before held by a black woman. She has been a staunch supporter of Legal Services, along with keying on issues befitting women's health and prisoner rights, and in advancing anti-discrimination measures.

Weinberg spent a dozen years in the State Assembly before her election to the upper house in 2005 and her subsequent elevation as its majority leader — the second most powerful post in that chamber. The Bergen County Democrat is one of the most widely recognized advocates for women in Trenton, and she has been in the forefront of equal pay, LGBT rights, marriage equality, transgender issues, Legal Services funding and many other matters favored by progressives. A colleague once said of Weinberg: "She is about speaking the truth; standing up for things she believes in. ...No matter what the issue — issues that affect women, families, children, civil rights in the State of New Jersey — she's always that voice."

Wilentz, who served as chief justice of the state's high court from 1979 to his death in 1996, presided during one of its most groundbreaking periods, carving out major decisions against discriminatory or exclusionary zoning and enhancing state funding from largely poor and minority school districts. An avid supporter of Legal Services and a prime mover to get more female judges elevated to court leadership positions, he often came under criticism, but refused to back off, even when it nearly cost him his tenure on the court. His belief in the doors of the courthouse being truly open to all was unflinching. At a 1995 Legal Services event, he put it this way: "The judiciary's obligation to provide equal justice to the poor is a constitutional

imperative. I regard the judiciary’s obligation to provide equal access, to that equal justice, as no less important. There is a long road to travel from equal justice for all, to equal access for all, but that is the road we are on, and I hope we won’t get off until we get there, no matter how long it takes.”

Del Tufo had several different periods in public service, but those who watched him move from one important position to another from 1963 until his death in 2016, recall that he was particularly sensitive to injustice, especially racial injustice, as well as the abuse of power and political corruption — targets he zeroed in on during his stint as state attorney general and the state’s chief federal prosecutor. During those years he advanced his reputation as a no-nonsense lawman, going after environmental violations, hate crimes, racial profiling and improving relations with civil rights and minority advocate groups. Additionally, he was committed to Legal Services, serving on its board of trustees for the better part of 30 years.

One of his friends noted, “Bob was a giant of our justice system and Legal Services will always be richer because he embraced its causes.”

Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), located in Edison, heads the state’s Legal Services system, a network of six independent non-profit corporations and has been providing free essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people through offices in all 21 counties for more than 50 years. Since its inception, LSNJ has provided representation in more than 2.4 million cases.

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