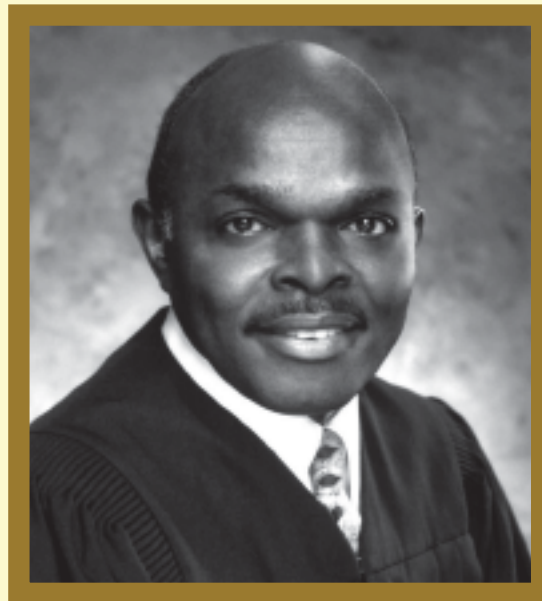




JUDGE WILLIAM J. HIBBLER: *in Memoriam*

*By Arlander Keys **



To put in perspective the story of the remarkable life and accomplishments of the late United States District Judge William J. Hibbler (“Bill”), it is necessary to start with and understand from whence he came. Born in rural Alabama in 1946, at a time when the Jim Crow laws were strictly enforced and African Americans were dissuaded from attending school and were expected only to perform back-breaking and arduous labor in the cotton fields from sunup to sundown, Bill’s parents, Arthur Lee and Mamie Lou, joined the “Great Migration” to the North in search of a better life for themselves and their children when Bill was two years old. They settled on Chicago’s West Side, where Bill attended elementary school and St. Mel High School. Bill excelled as a soccer player at St. Mel and was awarded a scholarship to the University of Illinois at Chicago. During his college years, Bill worked two part-time jobs – at United Parcel Service (UPS) and as a non-degree substitute teacher in the Chicago Public School System.

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**Arlander Keys is a United States Magistrate Judge for the Northern District of Illinois and one of Bill Hibbler’s dearest friends.*



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Graduating from college in 1969 was a first in Bill's family and was something that he was proud of, but he wanted more. In that same year, he married his long-time friend from elementary school, Regina. In that year, 1969, he decided that he wanted to become a lawyer and applied for and was accepted at the DePaul University College of Law. When he was notified that he had been accepted at DePaul, he was also advised that, because of the rigors of law school, he would need to quit his jobs, advice that he rejected because of his recent marriage and his desire to start a family.

Bill attended law school in the evenings and continued to work at UPS and to substitute teach during the day, graduating in 1973.

Unsure as to the area of law he would pursue, Bill would have been content to remain at UPS in its legal department, but there were no vacancies at the time, so he accepted a position as an Assistant States Attorney in the criminal division of the Cook County States Attorney's Office, where he worked for four years before becoming a partner in a small law firm. After four years at the law firm, he returned to the States Attorney's Office, where he served another five years before being appointed to the position of Associate Judge of the Cook County Circuit Court in the Criminal Division. During his tenure as an associate judge, he was also assigned as Assistant Supervising Judge in the Traffic Court and, finally, as Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Justice Division, where he served until 1999.

Recognizing Bill's remarkable background and achievements, in 1998, the Judicial Evaluation Committee that screened applicants for the filling of district court judge vacancies on the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, recommended him to fill one of the vacancies. He confided that, when he applied for the position, he didn't think he had a chance because he had no political connections. President Bill Clinton nominated him, the Senate confirmed him in 1999 and the rest is history.

As only the sixth African American Article III judge to be appointed to the bench in the Northern District of Illinois, Bill was cognizant of the historical significance of his appointment. As such, he knew that, at least initially, the decisions he made

would be scrutinized and that he would be challenged by those who questioned his competency to carry out the awesome responsibilities that had been placed upon him by virtue of his position. He readily accepted that scrutiny and, during his 13-year tenure, he made believers out of the doubters. Those who came into his presence expecting only fairness were invariably pleased while those who expected special consideration were sorely disappointed. He was proud of and never forgot the fact that he was brought up on the West Side of Chicago, with all its negative connotations, and was able to relate to the downtrodden as well as to those of more modest means. Bill treated everyone with whom he came in contact with respect, regardless of their stations in life. Some of his closest friends were those with whom he worked at UPS more than 40 years ago. He regularly engaged the court security officers, maintenance and janitorial employees in conversations, especially about sports. Upon learning of Bill's untimely death, one could see a sense of sadness and loss on their faces.

Whether on the bench or in chambers, Bill was perceived as being a quiet, warm, unassuming, compassionate and fair-minded jurist who believed that everyone was entitled to their day in court and fair treatment, regardless of the merits of their complaints. Bill truly enjoyed being a judge, not because he expected people to look up to him or to defer to him, but because of the things that he was able to do for others. Off the bench, he preferred that individuals with whom he came in contact not know that he was a judge. He wanted to be just plain Bill.

During the last ten years of his life, Bill endured numerous medical challenges after each of which he bounced back in remarkable ways. Through it all, he never complained or questioned why. Rather, his primary concern was the impact that his frequent absences was having on his staff and the workload of his colleagues. Up until the last day of his life, March 18, 2012, Bill expressed his belief that he would be returning to work during the week of March 19th, even though those who knew of the seriousness of his illness had doubts about his ability to do so, considering the fact that he had just been discharged from the hospital. Bill departed this life in the early morning hours of March 19, 2012. He leaves to mourn his death Regina, his wife of 42 years, his son, William II, his daughter, Aviv and father, Arthur, as well as his chambers staff and the entire Court family. We will all sorely miss him.