

Court Information Release



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STATEMENT OF CHIEF JUDGE CASTILLO ON THE PASSING OF RETIRED DISTRICT JUDGE GEORGE N. LEIGHTON

Today our Court mourns the loss of a beloved colleague, outstanding jurist, and a civil rights giant. George Leighton passed away yesterday at the age of 105. Judge Leighton, the son of immigrants from the Cape Verde Islands, grew up in Massachusetts. He earned his undergraduate degree from Howard University. Judge Leighton attended Harvard Law School. After completing his first year of law school, he began his service with the U.S. Army in World War II as a second lieutenant in the segregated 93rd Infantry Division. During his time in the Army, Judge Leighton rose to the rank of Captain, the highest rank available to an African-American. After honorably serving his country in the Army, Judge Leighton returned to Harvard Law School. After graduating Harvard Law School, he worked both in private practice in Illinois and served as an Illinois Assistant State Attorney General. In this role, he fought diligently to improve the balance of racial equality for all Americans. He was instrumental in attaining voting rights for African Americans in the early 1950s through the 1960s when America was struggling with this issue. He also fought for school desegregation and the right of African Americans to serve on juries. Judge Leighton continued his public service as a Circuit Court Judge in Cook County from 1964 to 1969. He then went on to become the first African American District Appellate Court Judge in Illinois from 1969 to 1971. Judge Leighton was appointed to this Court by President Gerald R. Ford in 1975, serving honorably until his retirement in 1987.

Chief Judge Rubén Castillo stated, “Our federal Court was proud to have Judge Leighton serve on our Court. The bottom line is that he left the world a better place because of his extraordinary legal and judicial career and tremendous public service.”

“The Court strongly believes that Judge Leighton, given his heroic military service, deserves burial with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery consistent with his personal wishes,” added Chief Judge Castillo.

From his military service to his use of the law to bring about change peacefully, Judge Leighton

will be remembered for his extraordinary courage and perseverance. We hold the Leighton family in our hearts during this difficult time.

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