

People



Joseph Woodrow Hatchett

In Memoriam

Akerman Remembers Legal Pioneer, Change Agent, and Former Partner, the Honorable Joseph Woodrow Hatchett

We are deeply saddened by the passing of our former partner, the Honorable Joseph Woodrow Hatchett, on April 30, 2021. Judge Hatchett was a towering figure in the legal profession. Known for his compassion, wisdom, and keen legal intellect, he broke down barriers and was a man ahead of his time on issues of social justice and equality. He was a legal pioneer, a change agent, a proud Akerman Partner, and friend to all he knew.

Judge Hatchett grew up in Clearwater, Florida. After graduation from Florida A&M University in 1954, Judge Hatchett was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Army. He entered Howard University School of Law in 1956 and earned his LL.B. degree in 1959.

After admission to the Florida Bar in November 1959, Judge Hatchett entered private practice, focusing on civil rights law in state and federal courts. In 1966, he was appointed assistant United States attorney for the Middle District of Florida, and in 1967, he was designated first assistant United States attorney. In 1971, he was appointed United States magistrate for the Middle District of Florida, becoming the first Black federal judicial officer in the South.

In 1975, Judge Hatchett was appointed to the Florida Supreme Court, becoming the first Black Justice to serve on Florida's highest court. Governor Reubin Askew, who named Judge Hatchett to this position, said that of everything he did as governor, Judge Hatchett's appointment gave him the most satisfaction.

In 1976, in electorally defending his seat on the Florida Supreme Court, Judge Hatchett became the first Black person to win a Florida statewide contested election in the twentieth century.

In 1979, Judge Hatchett was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, becoming the first Black

person to serve in a federal circuit that covered the Deep South. Judge Hatchett served 20 years as a federal circuit court judge, becoming Chief Judge of the 11th Circuit from 1996-99.

Judge Hatchett retired from the bench in 1999 and became a partner at Akerman, where he chaired our Appellate Practice. His contributions to our firm were extraordinary. Judge Hatchett's arrival immediately raised the reputation of our firm and our Appellate Practice Group, leading to a series of high profile engagements. He led our firm's efforts to bring diversity to our ranks; he was a counselor and confidant to many of our lawyers; he served in the highest levels of leadership, helping to guide our firm to its national prominence; and he became a true friend to many in our Akerman family.

Among the many honors and awards recognizing his work and commitment over his career, notably the National Bar Association inducted Judge Hatchett into its Hall of Fame in recognition of his dedication to the cause of justice and equality before the Courts of the United States of America, and on behalf of the Black community. The American Bar Association Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession awarded him the Spirit of Excellence Award, which is presented to exceptional lawyers who have made significant contributions to the promotion of racial and ethnic diversity within the legal profession.

In February 2021, Judge Hatchett was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Florida Supreme Court Historical Society. The society honored Judge Hatchett, "in recognition of his highly distinguished career as a lawyer, his many years of extraordinary contributions to Florida's Legal System as a highly respected member of the Judiciary, and his lifelong devotion to the improvement of the lives of others."

We are tremendously grateful for Judge Hatchett's lifetime of service. He leaves behind an extraordinary legacy that will continue to influence and inspire many generations to come. We are fortunate to have known him and to have called him our partner.