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Res. No. 1459

Resolution honoring Sheila Abdus-Salaam, Associate Judge of the New York State Court of Appeals, for her service to the State and City of New York.

By Council Members Cornegy, Constantinides and Barron

Whereas, On Wednesday, April 12, 2017 New York State Court of Appeals Justice, Sheila Abdus-Salaam, who spent her life in public service, passed away; and

Whereas, The Honorable Sheila Abdus-Salaam was the first African-American woman to serve on New York State’s highest court, a position served with distinction and an achievement that crowned a distinguished legal career; and

Whereas, Sheila Abdus-Salaam was born, Sheila Turner, in Washington, D.C. in 1952 to a working-class family and was one of seven children; and

Whereas, A young Ms. Turner was inspired to pursue a career in law after the civil rights lawyer,

Frankie Muse Freeman, visited her high school; and

Whereas, Ms. Abdus-Salaam would later recall of Freeman, “She was riveting...she was doing what I wanted to do: use the law to help people;” and

Whereas, Ms. Turner attended public schools in the nation’s capital before moving to New York where she attended and graduated from Barnard College in 1974; and

Whereas, Ms. Turner proceeded to Columbia Law School where she earned her J.D. in 1977; and

Whereas, In 1977, Ms. Turner married Sharif Abdus-Salaam, took his surname, which may be translated, “servant of all the peaceable,” and kept it though the marriage ended seven years later; and

Whereas, Upon graduation from law school, Ms. Abdus-Salaam immediately began serving the community as a staff attorney for East Brooklyn Legal Services; and

Whereas, One of her first jobs working for Legal Services was representing the poor in landlord-tenant disputes; and

Whereas, In 1980 she took a job as an assistant attorney general in the Civil Rights Bureau of the New York State Attorney General’s office; and

Whereas, One of her first cases and early victories as an assistant attorney general was an anti-discrimination suit brought by 30 female New York City bus drivers who had been denied promotions; and

Whereas, In 1988 Ms. Abdus-Salaam became General Counsel for the New York City Office of Labor Services until she was elected Civil Court Judge in 1991; and

Whereas, In 1993 Judge Abdus-Salaam was elected to the Supreme Court for New York County and re-elected in 2007; and

Whereas, Judge Abdus-Salaam was appointed an Associate Justice of the Appellate Division, First Department in 2009 by Governor David Paterson; and

Whereas, In 2013 Justice Abdus-Salaam was appointed to the Court Appeals by Governor Andrew Cuomo who praised her “working class roots” and her “deep understanding of the everyday issues facing New Yorkers”; and

Whereas, Justice Abdus-Salaam, whose great-grandfather had been a slave, stated in an interview, “All the way from Arrington, Virginia, where my family was the property of someone else, to my sitting on the highest court of the State of New York is amazing and huge,” she added, “It tells you and me what it is to know who we are and what we can do;” and

Whereas, It is generally agreed among her colleagues that Justice Abdus-Salaam was protective of the rights of the vulnerable and the accused; and

Whereas, Consistent with those principles, Justice Abdus-Salaam was committed to civil rights and equal access to justice; and

Whereas, In August of 2016, in the *Matter of Brooke S.B. v. Elizabeth A.C.C.*, a custody case involving a same-sex unmarried couple that jointly agreed to have a child, Appellate Court Justice Sheila Abdus-Salaam wrote an important decision that expanded the definition of who is a parent; and

Whereas, Justice Abdus-Salaam wrote, “...today, we overrule *Alison D.* and hold that where a partner shows by clear and convincing evidence that the parties agreed to conceive a child and to raise the child together, the non-biological, non-adoptive partner has standing to seek visitation and custody under Domestic Relations Law § 70.;

” and

Whereas, Justice Abdus-Salaam also served on the Task Force to Expand Access to Civil Legal Services

in New York, which seeks to address the crisis of the unrepresented in the State court system; and

Whereas, In 2010, the Task Force's first report noted that over 98% of tenants were unrepresented in eviction cases and 99% of borrowers were then unrepresented in consumer credit cases; and

Whereas, A subcommittee of the Task Force, led by Justice Abdus-Salaam, recommended that the Task Force be converted to a permanent entity through enactment of a Rule of the Chief Judge; and

Whereas, The creation of the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice was announced on July 22, 2015 by Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman;

Whereas, Sheila Abdus-Salaam came to New York City in 1974 to attend college and never left; and

Whereas, In 1980, Ms. Abdus-Salaam invested in Harlem community she loved, purchasing a brownstone where she lived until her recent and untimely death on April 12, 2017; and

Whereas, On the afternoon of that day, Justice Abdus-Salaam's lifeless body was found floating in the Hudson River-she was pronounced dead at 2pm by paramedics; and

Whereas, Police found no signs of trauma and the circumstances of her death remain unknown; and

Whereas, Justice Abdus-Salaam is survived by her husband, Rev. Gregory Jacobs; and

Whereas, Justice Abdus-Salaam spent her life in the service of the State of New York, our City and her fellow human beings; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York honors Sheila Abdus-Salaam, Associate Judge of the New York State Court of Appeals, for her service to the State and City of New York.

LS10794

5/3/2017

I.M.