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Affinity Bar Groups Pay Tribute to Abdus-Salaam

Len Maniace, New York Law Journal

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The late Sheila Abdus-Salaam was remembered at a private memorial Monday not only as a brilliant judge but as a warm and caring woman who was as eager to mentor generations of jurists and serve on the bench.

Nearly three dozen affinity bar groups representing female, black, Hispanic, LGBT and Muslim attorneys gathered to pay tribute to Abdus-Salaam, 65, whose body was found in the Hudson River on April 12 and whose death remains under investigation.

The private memorial, held at the New York City Bar Association, was sponsored by the Joint Bar Association Coalition. The New York Law Journal was invited to cover the event.

Judges, representatives of legal organizations, a past New York state attorney general and attorneys mentored by Abdus-Salaam spoke of a woman who set an example in many ways.

[Abdus-Salaam-Vert-201704131922.jpg]

"She was a champion with the odds stacked against her. A champion who hurdled challenge after challenge to make her way to the highest court in the state," said Joseph Drayton, a partner at Cooley who spoke on behalf of the National Bar Association. "We are not here because of that. We are here because she touched us a friend; touched us as a sister."

Former New York Attorney General Robert Abrams described hiring Abdus-Salaam as an assistant AG in 1980, about a year after he took office. He recalled her rise from deprivation in Washington, D.C., where she grew up, to graduating from Barnard College and Columbia Law School, eventually taking a seat on the state's highest court in 2013, becoming from first black woman to serve on that panel.

And he recounted his conversation with her before she sought election to a Civil Court judicial post in 1991.

"Sheila that's fantastic, you deserve to be a judge. You've got all the qualities to be a judge," Abrams recalled saying.

"Well, Bob, will you be a reference for me?"

"I said, 'Of course I will.' And that became the beginning of years of taking phone calls from judicial screening panels."

Brett Figlewski, legal director of the LGBT Bar Association of Greater New York, called Abdus-Salaam a trailblazer. He cited her decision last year in *Brooke S.B. v. Elizabeth A.C.C.*, which expanded the definition of parenthood and provided relief to LGBT families. It overturned a 1991 ruling by the Court of Appeals that held a nonbiological parent in a same-sex couple had no standing to seek visitation or custody rights after their relationship ended.

"For our community she will forever be remembered as a revered heroine for the advancement of the rights of LGBT families across the state," Figlewski said.

The tributes were often deeply personal.

Taa Grays, vice president and associate general counsel at Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., who spoke on behalf of the New York State Bar Association, said she met Abdus-Salaam at the Association of Black Women Attorneys, where both were members, and spoke of how their paths crossed through the years.

Grays said she caught up with Abdus-Salaam at a state bar event in January and remembered the conversation was more akin to a talk with an old friend than with one of the state's most distinguished judges. She said Abdus-Salaam immediately asked about the changes in Grays' life.

"I shared with her my experiences with the job and then she shared with me that she had recently gotten married, and what it was like to be married as a more mature woman," Grays said. "She was able to share that with me and it was very inspiring and comforting. That will be a memory that I cherish as the last one that I had with her."

Other speakers at the memorial included Bronx Supreme Court Justice La Tia Martin, on behalf of the Judicial Friends Association; Kaylin Whittingham, president of the Association of Black Women Attorneys; Appellate Division, First Department, Justice Angela Mazzaelli, on behalf of the Women's Bar Association of the State of New York and its chapters; Luis Gonzalez, a retired First Department presiding justice, on behalf of the Latino bar associations and the Latino Judges Association; Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Jeffrey Oing, on behalf of three Asian bar associations; city bar executive director Bret Parker; and Paula Edgar, president of the Metropolitan Black Bar Association.

A public memorial for Abdus-Salaam is scheduled for noon May 26 at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine.