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STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

JANUARY SESSION, A.D. 2020

HOUSE RESOLUTION

EXPRESSING DEEPEST CONDOLENCES ON THE PASSING OF THE HONORABLE
JUSTICE JOSEPH F. RODGERS, JR.

Introduced By: Representatives Mattiello, Shekarchi, Craven, McKiernan, and Millea

Date Introduced: January 07, 2020

Referred To: House read and passed

1 WHEREAS, The Honorable Joseph F. Rodgers, Jr., retired Presiding Justice of the Rhode
2 Island Superior Court, passed away on December 6, 2019 after a long and distinguished career of
3 exemplary public service; and

4 WHEREAS, Justice Rodgers was a product of the South Providence community to which
5 he was born. Taught by the Sisters of Mercy at St. Michael's and Bishop Tyler schools, he was
6 exposed to a dedication towards education and hard work that would be his hallmark, while his
7 humble origins provided the empathy that helped guide the justice and wisdom he dispensed from
8 the bench; and

9 WHEREAS, A graduate of La Salle Academy in 1958 and Providence College in 1962,
10 Justice Rodgers attended Boston University Law School full-time while living in Providence and
11 working as the Recreation Director at the Joslin Center and as a switch signal operator for the
12 New Haven Railroad. Admitted to the Rhode Island Bar in 1967, Justice Rodgers represented
13 many friends and families from the community as a partner in the firm of Brown, Rosen, Gentile
14 and Rodgers; and

15 WHEREAS, Justice Rodgers had the misfortune to lose his father during his first year of
16 law school, but he was the beneficiary of friends and family who supported and guided him
17 through those difficult days and beyond. In 1967, Ed Clement encouraged the new attorney to run
18 in a special election to serve the remainder of his two-year senate term, where he learned
19 firsthand the truth about two political maxims: every vote counts and don't take people for

1 granted, ask them for their vote personally. Winning a three-way democratic primary by
2 seventeen votes, Justice Rodgers always remembered the family of eight who supported him in
3 his election and witnessing one of his opponents thanking the same family for their support on
4 election day without ever asking for their votes previously; and

5 WHEREAS, Though Justice Rodgers is often remembered for being appointed to the
6 bench at the age of thirty-two, it should not be forgotten that it was his Senate colleagues who had
7 first put their faith in such a young person, falling short as the group of “young turks” candidate
8 for Senate Majority Leader in 1971 only to be selected by his peers to be the Chairman of the
9 Senate Judiciary Committee in 1973; and

10 WHEREAS, Civility is often absent from our present political process, yet Justice
11 Rodgers always made it a point to tell people to forget about labels and don’t think about people
12 as “Ds” or “Rs.” He believed that people entered politics with the hope of doing good—in their
13 own way—and always talked fondly of the lifetime friendships he formed with his Republican
14 seatmates. Politics may be the currency at the statehouse but friendships have value everywhere;
15 and

16 WHEREAS, At the age of thirty-two, Justice Rodgers became the youngest-ever judge in
17 Rhode Island’s history when former Governor Philip Noel appointed him to the District Court in
18 1974. A short two and a half years later, in 1976, he was named to the Superior Court. In 1991, he
19 was appointed Presiding Justice of the Superior Court by then-Governor Bruce Sundlun, and
20 served in that capacity until his retirement in 2009, when at that time his thirty-three years on the
21 Superior Court was the longest such tenure in that court’s 104 year history; and

22 WHEREAS, In his eighteen years as Presiding Justice of the Superior Court, Justice
23 Rodgers implemented many changes that made the court more customer friendly for the public,
24 litigants and jurors: reforming and restructuring the jury duty system in Rhode Island by reducing
25 the length of service from two weeks to two days or one trial, thereby making jury duty more
26 convenient and enabling more citizens to participate, reducing the backlog of civil cases awaiting
27 trial, and initiating a judge evaluation program, which has produced more than 60,000 evaluations
28 since its inception in 1992; and

29 WHEREAS, Justice Rodgers organized the nation’s first Gun Court and reduced the time
30 it takes for gun cases to proceed through the system, a design so successful that it has been
31 emulated by numerous courts across the country. In addition, Justice Rodgers established a Drug
32 Court for first-time adult offenders which provides for substance-abuse treatment as an alternative
33 to incarceration; and

34 WHEREAS, Justice Rodgers amassed numerous professional distinctions and privileges

1 during the course of his illustrious career. He was appointed by Governor J. Joseph Garrahy to
2 chair a commission to study Rhode Island's election laws, and was appointed by the Rhode Island
3 Supreme Court to chair the Commission on Judicial Tenure and Discipline from 1980 to 1986.
4 Justice Rodgers served on the National Democratic Committee to Reform Selection of Vice
5 Presidential Candidates and as a delegate to the National Conference of the Judiciary on the
6 Rights of Victims of Crime. He was a member of the Rhode Island Justice Commission, and was
7 also a member of the Board of Directors of Butler Hospital and Ocean Tides in Narragansett; and

8 WHEREAS, He was the beneficiary of many mentors in his lifetime, Justice Rodgers was
9 equally influential on all those who sought his guidance, especially in the Law enforcement
10 community, as he taught many courses on law at the National Judicial College in Reno, Nevada,
11 Providence College, Roger Williams University and the Community College of Rhode Island;
12 and

13 WHEREAS, Justice Rodgers was honored for his accomplishments by the very alma
14 maters that helped prepare him for his venerated career in law. He was inducted into the LaSalle
15 Academy Hall of Fame, and was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Providence College.
16 His distinguished impact on the State of Rhode Island and the City of Providence was recognized
17 when he was elected into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame and the Providence Recreation
18 Hall of Fame; and

19 WHEREAS, Throughout his long career, Justice Rodgers participated in many decisions
20 and cases that would affect the state and its people. It was his good fortune that such long tenure
21 provided him the opportunity to serve his last weeks as Presiding Justice with his daughter Kristin
22 as an Associate Justice of the Superior Court; and

23 WHEREAS, A person's legacy is marked by the way they are remembered by friends and
24 foes alike. Justice Rodgers, for all his years in public life dealing with issues from the mundane to
25 the most heinous, enjoyed the respect of all with whom he had dealings. Not everyone leaves the
26 court victorious, but no one ever left Justice Rodgers' courtroom feeling that they were not treated
27 fairly; and

28 WHEREAS, For all of that has been said and written in his praise let Justice Rodgers be
29 remembered by the sentiment expressed by his successor Presiding Justice Alice B. Gibney who,
30 when talking about the wisdom and generosity exhibited by Justice Rodgers inside and outside
31 the courtroom, stated that "There was no better Judge ... There was no better friend"; and

32 WHEREAS, Justice Rodgers leaves behind Donna Rodgers, his beloved wife of fifty-
33 three years. He also leaves behind his sons Joseph F. Rodgers III, Esq.; Edward (Ted) Rodgers;
34 his daughter Superior Court Associate Justice Kristin E. Rodgers and her husband Scott Raynes;

1 and his cherished granddaughters Leigh Ann Rodgers and Sydney Raynes; and a sister Jean
2 Patterson. He was the brother of the late Marjorie McDonald; now therefore be it

3 RESOLVED, That this House of Representatives of the State of Rhode Island and
4 Providence Plantations hereby expresses its deepest condolences on the passing of the Honorable
5 Joseph F. Rodgers, Jr., and be it further

6 RESOLVED, That the Secretary of State be and hereby is authorized and directed to
7 transmit duly certified copies of this resolution to Mrs. Donna B. Rodgers, Joseph F. Rodgers III,
8 Esq., the Honorable Kristin E. Rodgers, Edward P. Rodgers, and Jean R. Patterson.

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