



The Honorable Judge Sara J. Harper

Profile Highlights:

- Attorney, human rights activist, mother and judge
- First woman appointed to the Marine Corps judiciary
- Retired from U.S. Marine Corps as Lieutenant Colonel in 1986
- Co-founded the first Victims' Rights program in the country
- First African American woman to win a seat on the Ohio Court of Appeals
- Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame Inductee
- Ohio Civil Rights Hall of Fame Inductee
- National Bar Association's Hall of Fame Inductee



Judge Sara J. Harper (born August 10, 1926) grew up in Cleveland in Outhwaite Estates, a public housing complex in Cleveland.

Her passion for service began early at the age of eight, when she got involved in Republican Party politics. Throughout her lifetime, she attended party meetings, distributed literature, and would take her mother lunch on election day, while she worked polling places as a Republican booth worker.

- In 2014, Judge Sara J. Harper received recognition for her exemplary service from the Republican National Committee.

Her Distinguished Career

Judge Sara J. Harper graduated from John Adams High School in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. After graduating from Cleveland College in 1948, Sara J. Harper went on to become the first African-American woman to graduate from Case Western Reserve University's School of Law when she earned her degree in 1952.

- Judge Harper later served as president of the Case Western Reserve University Law School Alumni Association. And, in 2017, Judge Sara J. Harper was honored by the Case Western Reserve University Trailblazer Project, as a distinguished alumna of color who made history at Case Western Reserve University, in the community, and beyond.

Following graduation, Judge Harper practiced law, served as an Assistant City Prosecutor, and was Law Director for the City of Cleveland, in charge of the section on Urban Development and Economic and Human Resources.

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Her first experience with elective politics was at the age of 27, when she was the Republican Party's endorsed candidate for State Representative.

In 1970, Judge Harper was appointed by then Governor James A. Rhodes to fill a vacancy on the Cleveland Municipal Court. She was then elected in 1971 to a full term on that same court and served there until 1980.

President Richard M. Nixon commissioned Judge Harper to the United States Marine Corps in 1972. In 1974, she became the first ever female military judge in the history of the Marine Corps Reserve. Judge Harper retired from service in 1986, holding the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

In 1980, she ran as the endorsed Republican candidate for Chief Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court, carrying 39% of the vote.

Judge Harper was again elected to the Cleveland Municipal Court in 1985, a post she held until 1990. Judge Harper was then elected to the 8th District Ohio Court of Appeals, which includes Cleveland and Cuyahoga County in 1990. She was one of two black women who became the first females to win seats on the Ohio Court of Appeals and held this seat until 1997.

Judge Harper has been privileged to sit by assignment on the Ohio Supreme Court achieving another first for a black woman.

For her career achievements, Judge Harper has been widely recognized, receiving such accolades as the Ohio Supreme Court's Excellent Judicial Service Award and the NAACP's Unsung Heroine Award.

Commitment to Community

Judge Harper's service extends far beyond her judicial and political life. She has a strong commitment to community service and believes in promoting diversity, as well as consensus-building in her professional and personal life.

Judge Harper served as President of the Cleveland NAACP from 1982 to 1985 and fought against strip searches by police of female NAACP members who were arrested for minor traffic infractions.

The Judge founded the Stay in School and Back to School Project, which in eight years, enrolled over 17,000 students, and distributed \$150,000 in U.S. Savings Bonds for perfect attendance and academic achievement. She also was involved as a story hour reader for Head Start and the Celebrity Reading Program with Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Judge Harper was involved with anti-drug programs, Sister to Sister; a support group for women, and was a founder of Parent Power Cleveland, a parent pressure group for quality education.

Judge Harper has also organized lawyers from her congregation to help educate members to be intelligent consumers of the legal system.

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One of Judge Harper's crowning achievements has been to convene "Can We Talk," a group dedicated to reducing the incidence of violence among Black teens ages 13 to 19.

She continued to give back to the community by founding the Sara J. Harper Library, in the early 1990s in Outhwaite on East 43rd Street which is still open today. She wanted to inspire children to dream big and follow those dreams as she has done.

The Honorable Sara J. Harper was honored on her 90th birthday in 2016, by the Cuyahoga County Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA). She was recognized for her service and commitment with a street dedication of Sara J. Harper Way, at the corner of East 43rd Street in Cleveland.

Her Family

Judge Harper credits her father for his steadfast support – and his enlightened belief that his five daughters should be well educated and self-reliant. Her mother was active in politics and church, two passions she adopted in her life as well.

Judge Sara J. Harper was married to her husband, Judge George W. Trumbo, WWII Navy Veteran, for 64 years, until his passing in 2014. Judge Harper and Judge Trumbo raised five children, seeing them onto successful careers, and Judge Harper now has five grandchildren. Judge Harper has always been deeply committed to education for her community, her family and herself. Judge Harper is a member of Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church in Cleveland.

"I still apply lessons learned in tactics class. There are four points that determines who wins a war: knowledge of the enemy, superior weapons, leadership, and the will to win. While the first three may be present, if a party lacks the will to win, they will not win. These principles apply to everything you do in life."

Judge Sara J. Harper