



Attorney Patricia Roberts Harris - Unsung Hero for Public Service

This article talks about Attorney Patricia Roberts Harris who became acquainted with Robert Kennedy and they began a friendship during his appointment as attorney general. Three years later, 1963, she accepted the appointment of co-chairman of the National Women’s Committee for Civil Rights bestowed by her friend, President John F. Kennedy.



Attorney Patricia Harris was born in Matton, Illinois in 1924. She met William Beasley Harris in 1945 who was a professor at Howard University where she attended. The two married in 1955. Before she obtained a law degree she worked as Assistant Director of the American Council on Human Rights until 1953. Attorney Patricia Harris then graduated in 1960 from George

Washington University Law Center. She graduated as number one in her class and then was admitted to practice law before the U.S. Supreme Court. She returned to Howard University in 1961 to be an associate dean of students and a law professor by 1963. In 1969 Attorney Patricia Harris became Dean of the Howard University Law School. This didn’t complete her goals. She was beginning her career in the political arena simultaneously to her legal career.

Going back in time now to 1960, when Harris took a position as an attorney for the government in appeals and research, Criminal Division, Department of Justice. It was during her government position that fate took its course and she befriended President John Kennedy when he was the attorney general and in 1963 she accepted the position of co-chairman for the National Women’s Committee for Civil Rights.

Attorney Patricia Harris’ political career continued to fall into place as she became a Professor at Howard Law School. In 1964 she became a delegate to the Democratic National Convention and she served in Lyndon Johnson’s presidential campaign. Not only did she work in his campaign, but she was the voice who seconded his nomination at the Democratic Convention in 1964. During Johnson’s term as president, he

appointed her to become Ambassador to Luxemburg beginning in 1965 up to 1967.

After being Dean at Howard Law School from 1969 to 1972 she decided to join a top law firm in Washington D.C. Her political career was still thriving as she practiced law. At the same time she held a high position for the Democratic Party and once President Jimmy Carter took office she was appointed two cabinet-level posts.

- Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 1973
- Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979
- As Secretary of Department of Education, Patricia Harris remained the appointed secretary when the department of Education was converted to the Department of Health and Human Services until Carter left the Presidency in 1981.

In her final years, from 1982 to 1985 she gained a full-time professorship at her Alma Mater, George Washington National Law Center. Attorney Patricia Harris didn’t put down her political dreams until 1982 when she ran for mayor of Washington D.C. and was unsuccessful. In 3 short years, at the age of 60, she succumbed to cancer and her final resting place is Rock Creek County Cemetery in Washington, D.C., March 23, 1985.

The story of Attorney Patricia Harris doesn’t end on that date. In the year 2000 she was dubbed the ‘‘Unsung Hero’’ for Public Service in law and politics by a commemorative postage stamp in the Black Heritage stamp series. Attorney Patricia Harris was the seventh African-American woman honored this way and the twenty-third American honored on a U.S. Postage stamp.

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