

Indigent helper Johnson, 81, dies

Hubbard native, Baylor grad fought for poor as judge

By M.B. TABOADA
Cox News Service

Senior 5th U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Sam D. Johnson, who was often called the people's judge, has died.

Johnson established one of the first Texas legal organizations for the indigent and used his swearing-in as Texas Supreme Court justice in 1973 to call attention to the lack of legal services for the poor.

"He never allowed the trap-pings of where he had risen to separate himself from the people he was serving," said Kirk Watson, Austin's former mayor who worked as a clerk for Johnson in 1981 and is the Democratic candidate for attorney general. "His life was one of the best examples I've seen in my life of service."

Johnson died Saturday at his home in Austin. He was 81.

Born Nov. 17, 1920, in Hubbard, Johnson graduated from Baylor University. After serving in the Army during World War II, he earned a law degree from the University of Texas at Austin. He began his legal career in Hillsboro, where he was elected county attorney and then district attorney.

In 1958, he was elected Hill



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JUDGE Johnson a 'hero' to many lawyers

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County district judge, a position he served until 1965 when he resigned to become the first director of the Houston Legal Foundation, an indigent defense program.

Two years later, Johnson was appointed as a justice on the Texas 14th Court of Appeals in Houston. In 1972 he sought and won election to the Texas Supreme Court.

Johnson used the swearing-in ceremony to advocate offering legal services to disadvantaged Texans.

"If a doctor in the medical profession with the means and the medicine to relieve suffering withheld that medicine and that service, we would think it absolutely unthinkable," Johnson said that day. "And yet, those of us in the legal profession have long withheld, and continue to withhold, legal service to the poor of Texas."

Johnson served as Texas Supreme Court justice for about six years before President Carter appointed him to the United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans in 1979.

Brad Toben, dean of the Baylor University Law School, described Johnson as a hero to many Texas lawyers.

'Outstanding jurist'

"Judge Johnson was one of our nation's truly outstanding jurists," he said. "He has been an example of a judge who possessed the best of all the traits we each want in any judge."

"He had superb intellect, a commitment that the law serve the people, and an abiding, deep concern about every person before his court, including, very importantly, those at the margin of society. Our nation has lost a giant in the profession and a true American hero."

Toben said Johnson had planned to attend the Baylor law school, but it closed for three years during World War II because of low enrollment.

In all, Johnson wrote more than 900 court opinions during his 35 years on the bench.

Johnson also served in the 95th Infantry Division, 3rd Army, in World War II. He was wounded outside of Metz, France, on his 24th birthday. He was awarded the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star and the Combat Infantryman's Badge.

Johnson is survived by his wife, June; his daughter Page Johnson Harris of Georgia; and his daughter Janet Johnson Clements and son Sam Johnson of Austin.

Tribune-Herald staff writer Mike Anderson and the Associated Press contributed to this story.