

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable James R. Spencer

PERSON

Spencer, James R., 1949-

Alternative Names: The Honorable James R. Spencer;

Life Dates: March 25, 1949-

Place of Birth: Florence, South Carolina, USA

Residence: Richmond, VA

Work: Charlottesville, VA

Occupations: Federal District Court Judge

Biographical Note

Judge James R. Spencer was born on March 25, 1949 in Florence, South Carolina. He was among the first in his family to attend college, enrolling at Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia in 1967. He graduated magna cum laude in 1971, and went on to study at Harvard Law School, where he obtained his J.D. degree in 1974. The following year, Spencer graduated in the top five percent of his class at the Judge Advocate General's School at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia. Spencer later studied at the Howard University School of Divinity, graduating in 1985.

Spencer's interest in law began in 1967, while working under civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman at her public interest law firm, the Washington Research Project. Upon graduating from Harvard Law School, he worked as a staff attorney with the Atlanta Legal Aid Society. He went on to serve as a prosecutor, and then as chief of justice, with the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's Corps from 1975 to 1978. From there, Spencer became an assistant attorney general, serving the U.S. Attorney's Office of District of Columbia. He was the first African American attorney assigned to the office's Major Crimes Division. In 1983, he moved to the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Eastern District of Virginia, where he remained until 1986 when he was appointed by President Ronald Reagan as the first African American district court judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. From 1987 to 1996, Spencer also served as an adjunct professor of law at the University of Virginia. In 2004, Spencer was appointed as chief justice of the district, serving until 2011. In 2014, Spencer assumed the rank of senior judge. He presided over a number of high-profile cases over

the course of his career, including the 2006 patent infringement suit between Research In Motion, the maker of BlackBerry devices, and the patent holding company NTP, Inc.; and the 2014 corruption trial of Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell.

Spencer was a member of numerous professional, civic and fraternal organizations, including the State Bar of Georgia, the District of Columbia Bar, the Virginia State Bar, the National Bar Association, the Old Dominion Bar Association, and the Federal Bar Association, Big Brothers of America, the NAACP, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Alpha Kappa Mu, Sigma Pi Phi, and Phi Beta Kappa. Spencer also earned a black belt and was a member of the U.S. Karate Association. He served as associate pastor of the 3rd Union Baptist Church in King William, Virginia.

Judge James R. Spencer was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on December 8, 2016.

Related Entries

Clark Atlanta University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

B.A.

Harvard Law School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

J.D.

Howard University School of Divinity [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Carver Elementary Magnet School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Wilson High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Wilson Junior High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Washington Research Project [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1967 to ?]

Assistant

Atlanta Legal Aid Society [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1974 to 1975]

Staff Attorney

U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's Corps [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1975 to 1978]

Prosecutor; Chief of Justice

District of Columbia [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1978 to 1983]

Assistant Attorney General

Eastern District of Virginia [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1983 to 1986]

Assistant U.S. Attorney

Eastern District of Virginia [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1986 to 2004]

Federal District Court Judge

University of Virginia [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1987 to 1996]

Adjunct Law Professor

Eastern District of Virginia [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 2004 to 2011]

Chief Judge

Eastern District of Virginia [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 2014 to ?]

Senior Judge

Phi Beta Kappa [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Member

3rd Union Baptist Church [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Associate Pastor

U.S. Karate Association [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Member, Black Belt

Omega Psi Phi [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Member

Sigma Pi Phi [MEMBEROf]
[from ? to ?]

Member