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Tribute: Dores McCrary McCree

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DORES McCRARY MCCREE

*David L. Chambers**

Dores McCree made your day a little better whenever she walked into a room. When you talked with her, you knew her goal was simply to enjoy your company, not to get something out of you, and not to show herself off. She was good at talking and good at listening. She'd cock her head slightly and ask questions to which she really cared about the answers. On more than one occasion, I had to jockey with others to be able to sit with her at a dinner.

I recently read the oral history Dores gave about Wade as part of Wayne State University's Detroit African-American History Project.¹ She and Wade married while Wade was a law student at Harvard. Dores, trained as a librarian, worked until their first child, Kathleen, was born. She stood behind Wade while he finished law school near the top of his class (completing the final two years in eighteen months), while he searched for jobs after law school (denied employment by white law firms in Boston and Detroit before joining a small black firm in Detroit), and while, over a twenty-five year period, he served as a Michigan state circuit judge, a federal district judge, a federal appellate judge and Solicitor General of the United States. Dores worked again as a librarian at Wayne County General Hospital while their children were young. She helped Wade campaign for the elected circuit judgeship in Detroit (the first African-American elected judge in Michigan). She accompanied him to countless dinners and conventions. Mostly, she stayed in his shadow. After his death in 1987 (at the far too young age of 67), Dores devoted a great deal of time to sustaining Wade's public memory—attending dinners and receptions for scholarships in his name, serving as the founding president of the Historical Society for the U.S. District Court of the Eastern District of Michigan, and much else.

For us at the Law School, Dores emerged fully from Wade's shadow when she joined the law school's administrative staff a year after he died. She became good friends with many of us on the faculty and with a wide range of staff members. Over the years, she served many functions within the school, but I knew her best for the time she spent advising students, particularly African-American students—encouraging them in their studies and helping them find employment as judicial clerks, law firm associates and public-service attorneys. In the late 1990s, I knew she had fully emerged in her own right when I was speaking to an African-American

* Wade H. McCree, Jr. Collegiate Professor Emeritus of Law, University of Michigan Law School.

1. *Meeting Wade McCree*, DETROIT AFRICAN-AM. HISTORY PROJECT, <http://www.daahp.wayne.edu/interviewsDisplay.php?id=139>.

student after class and referred to Wade and a course he and I had once taught together, and the student said, "That was Mrs. McCree's husband, right?"

At the end of reading the oral history about Wade, I wanted so much for the interviewer to keep on going and to ask Does more about her own life. But he didn't, despite the fact that it was Does, not Wade, who had grown up in Detroit and graduated from Wayne State, and despite the fact that Does was such an obviously interesting person. I wanted the interviewer to ask her about her career as librarian, to learn to what degree her career as a librarian had been held back by being African-American, or by being a woman; or by being an African-American woman, to ask her whether she ever resented her role as a famous person's wife and to press her a bit when she denied it, to ask her what she would have done for a career if she had been born not in 1920 but rather in 1947, the year her daughter Kathleen was born. Softer spoken but fully as sharp as her daughter, Does might have chosen to be a librarian but could have become anything else she wanted, though she would, like Kathy, still have had to cope with lingering racism and sexism in whatever profession she'd chosen.

In the end, of course, I am selfishly glad that Does led exactly the life she did, for it meant that we at the Law School got the value of her services and I got the opportunity to know her as a friend.