

Milwaukee Ald. Johnson: Wisconsin loses a champion with the passing of Vel Phillips

Posted on Wednesday, Apr 18, 2018

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Statement of Alderman Cavalier "Chevy" Johnson

This week, when some Wisconsinites talk about historic snowfall not seen in generations, I say we reflect on the life of a woman that in its own right was a force of nature.

Wisconsin has lost a champion with the passing of Vel Phillips. She made history with many "firsts" as a person of color and as a woman. She was the first woman judge in Milwaukee County - and first African-American judge in Wisconsin - and would become the first African-American elected into statewide office.

Her work not only inspired generations of African-Americans to believe they too can succeed, but also opened doors that still affect our everyday lives. In my case, I graduated from UW-Madison the same institution where Vel went to law school, the first African-American woman to graduate from there. And a reason my family and I live north of Capitol Drive is because of the work that Vel did fighting for fair housing alongside Father Groppi those many years ago.

I had known Vel for years, and she and I served on the Milwaukee Community Brainstorming Executive Board together. When I ran for Common Council, Vel Phillips' endorsement landed on the front page of the Milwaukee Community Journal, certifying me a serious candidate. Today, I have the pleasure of writing this in the very office that Vel Phillips christened as Milwaukee's first African-American Alderperson.

For African-American elected leaders in Wisconsin, Vel Phillips continues to be that North Star as she remains the only African-American elected statewide in Wisconsin's history. This community and this state will never forget the impact that Vel Phillips has made here.