

Milwaukee Alderwoman Coggs: A well-deserved place of honor for Vel R. Phillips

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I am filled with pride knowing that Vel R. Phillips, the first African American woman elected to statewide office, will be honored with a statue on the State Capitol grounds at the corner of W. Main St. and S. Carroll St. in Madison.

The statue – approved Monday, November 1 by the State Capitol and Executive Residence Board – will be erected in late 2022 or early 2023. It has been my high honor to serve on the Vel Phillips Task Force, a body that was formed to drive the effort to have Ms. Phillips’ statue be the first depicting an African American on the Capitol grounds.

It was also my honor to author the successful Common Council legislation to rename N. 4th St. as N Vel R. Phillips Ave., and to create the Vel R. Phillips Trailblazer Award, bestowed each year as part of Girls’ Day at City Hall to recognize selfless service and work to improve the quality of life for residents in Milwaukee.

Vel R. Phillips (Velvlea Hortense Rodgers Phillips, 1923-2018) was a Milwaukee native who became a leader in not only the African-American community but was a trailblazer and role model for all Milwaukeeans, for Wisconsin, and the nation. Ms. Phillips achieved many “firsts” in her lifetime:

- First African-American woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School

- First African-American to be elected to the Milwaukee Common Council
- First female judge in Milwaukee, and the first African-American judge in Wisconsin
- First person of color to be elected Secretary of State in Wisconsin
- First African-American to be elected as a member of the Democratic National Committee.

Whether serving as an elected official or as a private citizen, Ms. Phillips worked tirelessly to better her community with a fearless and pioneering spirit. She will be remembered for her mission to eliminate barriers between disadvantaged people and their goals, clearing the path for educational, occupational, social and political parity.

I am hopeful that those who gaze upon her statue on the Capitol grounds will be inspired to learn more about her and to strive to emulate her spirit and her contributions to our world.