

# **The Honorable Z. Mae Perkins Jimison: Eloquent Warrior**

**By Crystal Mikell Reynolds, Ph.D.**

## **Introduction**

The Honorable Z. ( Zilthia) Mae Perkins Jimison was a superior court judge, an attorney, and a faithful wife and mother. Her remarkable career of 35 years, started humbly in Indianapolis, Indiana, through her college years at Indiana State University where she became a leader in the Black Student Union and continued through her years as Marion County's Superior Court Judge. This female warrior fought for the rights of all people and treated all people with dignity, kindness, and respect.

## **Early Years/College Years**

Indiana State University's first African American female Black Student Union Prime Minister and Marion County, Indiana's first African American female superior court judge was born Zilthia Mae Perkins on June 29, 1943 to Evangelist Anderson Edward Perkins, Sr. and Osie Dee Williams Perkins. Her parents had both emigrated to Indiana from Tennessee during this country's Black Migration in search of better opportunities. Her father wore many hats: evangelist, restaurant owner, and master molder. Her mother was a devoted wife, homemaker, and restaurateur. These exceptional individuals instilled in the young Mae and her siblings the importance of and the love of education. Her father, in particular, helped to mold Mae, sharing with her his love of learning and books. Every Saturday he and Mae would take a weekly jaunt to the Indianapolis library where they would spend many hours engrossed in books. Though Mae was one of nine children, the siblings all knew that this was young Mae and Father Perkins special time. She was the apple of her dad's eye.

The oldest of five girls, she, along with her youngest siblings, attended Indianapolis School Number 43 from first through eighth grade and then Shortridge High School in Indianapolis. In high school, she was at the top of her class. She was an excellent student with a thirst for knowledge, a natural curiosity about the world around her, and love of music and songwriting. This love of music would continue throughout her life.

It was in her early formative years that her values and worldview were set. From early on, Mae did not buy into the concept that it was a man's world. She believed that anything she put her mind to she could accomplish. This belief was echoed and re-enforced by her parents who taught her that there were no limitations... "just get it done." The Perkins also told her that, "other people don't make your rules, you make your own rules." Her parents forced Mae and

her siblings to be independent and independent of each other. These lessons proved useful throughout her life, for she broke the glass ceiling numerous times, and she did not let others define her.

In 1963, she graduated from high school and entered Indiana Central Business College, graduating in 1965. She pursued her degree while working at Apex Finance Center in Indianapolis. On September 25, 1965, Z. Mae married the love of her life Robert M. Jimison, Sr., a union that would last 43 years. The couple had three children (Joanne {deceased as an infant}, Robert M. Jr., and Willard Edward).

Soon after graduating from business school and hoping to further her education, both Jimison and her husband Robert entered Indiana State University where she majored in history, graduating with a bachelor of arts degree while earning summa cum laude honors. At Indiana State, Jimison was an outstanding student. History Professor Emeritus Gary Daily believes she was the best student he ever taught: “She was my top student, best student I ever had. She did the work, and she understood the material. She was a reader/writer. She spoke eloquently on the issues and understood the issues.”

Daily maintains that she was not only a talented student, but that she was also a great leader: “She had talent, maturity, brains, and dedication to be a leader.” This leadership ability would present itself in several ways though out her tenure at ISU. While an undergraduate student at ISU, Jimison was active in the Black Student Union, first as a member and then in 1972 as prime minister. Arguably Jimison was one of the most respected and prolific BSU leaders in the School’s history. While prime minister, she also successfully wore many other hats: wife, mother, student government leader, and mentor.

As prime minister from 1972 to 1973, one of her most significant accomplishments was her fight to help realize the Afro American Cultural Center. When progress on the cultural center become stagnant, Jimison led a crusade to ensure that the AACC, which had been called for by the BSU as a result of a 1970 tumultuous race riot on campus, was realized. Using her exceptional leadership skills, unequalled brilliance, diplomatic skills, and her no nonsense attitude and approach, she was able to convince President Rankin and the University that the AACC must become a reality with all deliberate speed.

One historic example of how she was able to convince the President of the urgency of the AACC was that she and several other BSU members went to Rankin’s home (Condit House, which is located in the center of campus) one night. Rankin, who was in his bath robe, came outside to speak with them. They soon took the conversation into the house. About an hour later, Jimison and the students emerged confident that the President understood the urgency of the cultural center and confident that he empathized with their cause. All accounts of the impromptu meeting with the president confirm that Mae was brilliant and eloquent as she advocated for the realization of the cultural center.

Through her leadership, the AACC officially opened on October 22, 1972. In a 1972 letter to top administrators, in her usual gracious and eloquent style, she thanked the President and the University, stating that they had kept their promise and she respected that. This respect was mutual, for on numerous occasions in subsequent years, the former president had only kind words and pride as he spoke about Jimison.

Affectionately called “the Shack by the Railroad Track” by Jimison and other Black students, the Center, which was once an abandoned building located on the outskirts of the campus, was transformed into a respected and vibrant center of Black culture and learning on the campus of Indiana State University. The AACC became a special place for students of color to socialize and a place where prominent visitors and speakers visited and felt welcomed. Notable speakers to visit the Center and interact with the students of all races during Jimison’s time at State were poet Nikki Giovanni, historian Lerone Bennett, and civil rights activist Dick Gregory. This was the “House” that Jimison, her premier Joseph Arnold, and her fellow Black students built. Although the original “house” is now defunct, the Charles E. Brown African American Cultural Center, named after its long-time director and a dear friend of Jimison, has re-emerged stronger and more vital than ever in a more prominent location on campus. Mae’s warrior spirit lives on in the hallways of the new Center and in the hearts and minds of those who knew her.

Upon graduating with a bachelor of arts degree summa cum laude and receiving President Alan C. Rankin’s Outstanding Senior Award in 1973, she traveled and studied in Europe. Upon her return to the United States with a new worldview, Jimison earned a master’s of arts degree from ISU in 1976 in history. Jimison remained an exceptional student; her brilliance and legacy continued in the halls of Stalker Hall.

Not content to rest on her laurels, this brilliant student earned a law degree from Ohio State Law School in 1977.

## **Professional Years**

### *Attorney*

After passing the Indiana Bar in 1977, Jimison went into private practice. After a few years as a sole practitioner, she worked for a couple of Indiana law firms where she gained valuable experience. Mae soon emerged as an exceptional trial attorney, which was no surprise given her intelligence and eloquence.

### *Public Service*

Jimison believed in giving back to her community. In that spirit, she served on the Indianapolis City-Council from 1992-1995. Then in 1995, she heeded the call of higher public service and became a mayoral candidate in Indianapolis. Running as a Democratic candidate against

Republican Stephen Goldsmith, she was the first African American to win an Indianapolis mayoral primary. Although she came short of the required votes for victory, her professional and stellar campaign was a victory in itself. Her candidacy paved the way for future African American mayoral candidates in the city.

### *Judge*

Remarkably, in 1988, Jimison was appointed as superior court judge by Republican Governor Robert D. Orr, becoming the first black woman to serve as a judge on the Marion Superior Court. She served admirably from 1988 to 1990. Then in 1996, in a historic election, Jimison was elected to the Marion Superior Court bench and served for six years (1996-2002). In 2002, after a gallant campaign, this warrior lost her bid for re-election. This groundbreaker paved the wave for other women to enter the judiciary in Indiana.

In her role as superior court judge, Jimison was the guiding force and early pioneer of the groundbreaking Drug Treatment Court in Indiana.

### *Awards*

For her service to her community, Jimison received many honors, including The Distinguished Alumni Award from Indiana State University and the State of Indiana Sagamore of the Wabash Award presented to her by former Governor Joe Kernan.

### *Organizations*

Ever the giver, Jimison was a member of several organizations. She was also the State Chair of the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday.

### *Emeritus Years*

After leaving her role as Superior Court Judge, the Honorable Z.Mae Jimison, continued to use her unique gifts to help her community. She was active in the College Avenue Church of Christ where her brother, Dr. D. E. Perkins, Sr. is the minister. She remained active in several organizations and focused more on her amazing culinary skills. All through her life Mae had a reputation for being an outstanding cook, perhaps a gift from her restaurateur parents. She was famous for her fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, greens, and biscuits. Sadly, this renaissance woman passed away March 5, 2008 at the age of 64.

### **Conclusion**

Upon entering the graduate program at ISU with a major in history, one of the first names this author heard was Z. Mae Jimison. In noting that there had been very few African American women masters level history majors at the college and that one of the last ones had been the

brilliant Jimison, the ISU history professors, even went so far as to compare me to her. I knew then that just to be mentioned in the same sentence with Mae was an honor, especially when a spark flickered in their eyes as they mentioned her. But, what I did not know until years later when I interviewed the very eloquent Judge Jimison in her chambers for my doctoral dissertation and subsequently came to know her on a personal level, was how much of an honor that our history professors had actually bestowed upon me. For a comparison of me to Jimison was inaccurate; there was no comparison. There was no one else like her; she was one of a kind. A humble woman with a warrior spirit describes this servant of the Lord, wife, mother, attorney, judge, and force behind the Afro American Cultural Center at Indiana State University.

Today, November 8, 2014, in cooperation with the Incorporated Gathering, the Department of History, the Department of Afro American Studies, the Office of Diversity, and Indiana State University honor The Honorable Z. Mae Jimison. With her great mind and warrior spirit, she continues to inspire others. The *highest tribute* that her family, friends, fellow alum, colleagues and others can give to Jimison is that we all continue to fight for what is right and good in our nation and in the world and that we continue to be curious about the world around us and that we strive to make it better.

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