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Tribute to the Honorable Rosalie E. Wahl

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TRIBUTE TO THE HONORABLE ROSALIE E. WAHL^{*}

Lori Sturdevant[†]

Rosalie Wahl was a blessing to this state and to this nation, and I suspect she was also a personal friend, a role model, and a favorite of many of us gathered here today.

I count myself blessed by Rosalie Wahl—inspired by her, encouraged by her, and in a real sense liberated by her, as she broke barriers that, had she not come before, might have stood in my way.

Among those who would say the same are U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar and Minnesota Supreme Court Chief Justice Lorie Skjerven Gildea—both of whom are here today. Thank you, Senator; thank you, Chief Justice.

We're also honored by the presence of a number of distinguished servants from all three branches of government, especially the branch Rosalie loved and worked to refine, the judiciary. Welcome all.

Governor Mark Dayton could not be here, but he sent greetings and a proclamation¹ I'd like to read:

^{*} This article is the edited text of six tributes to the Honorable Rosalie E. Wahl, presented at a memorial service at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis on September 21, 2013.

[†] Editorial writer and columnist of the *Star Tribune*, and the author of the book *HER HONOR: ROSALIE WAHL AND THE MINNESOTA WOMEN'S MOVEMENT* (forthcoming spring 2014).

1. Proclamation, Mark Dayton, Governor of Minn., Rosalie Wahl Day (Sept. 20, 2013), *available at* http://mn.gov/governor/images/20130919_rosalie_wahl_day.pdf.



STATE of MINNESOTA

Proclamation

- WHEREAS: Justice Rosalie Wahl served as a Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court with great distinction from 1977 to 1994. Appointed by Governor Rudy Perpich, she was the first woman to serve on the court; and
- WHEREAS: Born in Kansas, Justice Wahl graduated from the University of Kansas, where she worked to end segregated student housing. While raising five children, she took night classes and earned her law degree from William Mitchell College in 1967. At a time when it was difficult for women to be accepted in the legal profession, she became a state public defender and argued more than 100 cases; and
- WHEREAS: Throughout her distinguished career, Justice Wahl fought against discrimination and for equality and due process before the law. She joined the faculty of William Mitchell College in 1973; and
- WHEREAS: After being appointed to the Minnesota Supreme Court in 1977, Justice Wahl successfully won election to her seat five times. She created court task forces on racial and gender discrimination, focusing attention on bias in Minnesota's justice system. She was recognized by her colleagues for her intellect, compassion, and deeply held sense of fairness; and
- WHEREAS: After 17 years on the Supreme Court, Justice Wahl retired in 1994 and remained an active citizen, serving on numerous boards and organizations; and
- WHEREAS: Justice Rosalie Wahl devoted her life to the unwavering support of equal justice for all. A remarkable jurist, she provided the people of Minnesota with exceptional public service and made Minnesota a better place.

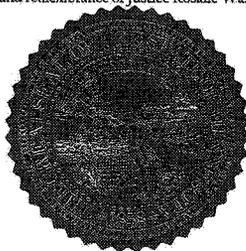
NOW, THEREFORE, I, MARK DAYTON, Governor of Minnesota, do hereby proclaim Saturday, September 21, 2013, as:

ROSALIE WAHL DAY

in the State of Minnesota, and do hereby order all U.S. flags and Minnesota flags be flown at half-staff at all state and federal buildings in the State of Minnesota, from sunrise until sunset on Saturday, September 21, 2013, in honor and remembrance of Justice Rosalie Wahl.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Great Seal of the State of Minnesota to be affixed at the State Capitol this 19th day of September in the year of our Lord two thousand and thirteen, and of the State the one hundred fifty-sixth.

Mark Dayton
GOVERNOR



Mark Ritchie
SECRETARY OF STATE

2014]

TRIBUTE TO JUSTICE ROSALIE E. WAHL

The governor's proclamation tells some of the Rosalie Wahl story. Let me share a little more:

She was a person of resilience—a survivor of tragedy and losses that sharpened her sense of justice but did not deprive her of courage or hope.

She was a person of compassion—who empathized with those who saw life and experienced justice from the bottom up.

She was a person of determination—not about to give up law school because she was pregnant, not about to yield a court seat to better-known challengers, not about to let the habits of institutional sexism and racism go unchallenged.

She was a lover of language—a voracious reader, an incisive legal opinion writer, an evocative poet. The power of her spare verse made it hard to forget. My guess is that many of you know well the poem she wrote as she began law school in 1962:

Foot in nest
Wing in sky
Bound by each
Hover I.²

She added, on that night in St. Cloud in 1977 when her appointment was announced:

Now I know it is not necessary to hover. Now I know it is possible to soar, to know the vastness of the sky and then come back, fully, to the nest, enriched by the vision of the whole and by the exercise.

Now I know it is possible to extend the nest to include our children wherever they are—in the factories, at the switchboards, in the mines, the shops, the halls of finance and commerce and government and nourish there the values which were sprouted by the hearth—a sense that every individual in the human family is a unique and precious being, a sense of justice and fair play, a sense of compassion where justice ends or fails.³

Rosalie was a person who knew well those values “sprouted by the hearth”—learning them from the loving grandmother and devoted aunt who raised her. As a mother, a grandmother, a

2. Rosalie E. Wahl, Assoc. Justice, Minn. Supreme Court, Address to the Minnesota Women's Meeting, St. Cloud, Minn. (June 3, 1977), in *Rosalie Wahl Papers* (on file with the Minnesota Historical Society).

3. *Id.*

teacher, a friend, and a supreme court justice, she lived by those values and taught them to others.

Rosalie was a singer—not a soloist, but one who loved to raise her voice in concert with others whom she would rally to sing along. That was the kind of music she loved best—human voices raised together in heartfelt song.

She was also a person of faith. She was an active Methodist Youth Fellowship member as a youth and a convert to the Religious Society of Friends as an adult. That society was her wellspring—nourishing her spirit with an uplifting conviction that holiness abides in every member of the human family.

I expect that within these tributes we will catch a glimpse of that better aspect of humanity ourselves—courtesy of Rosalie.