

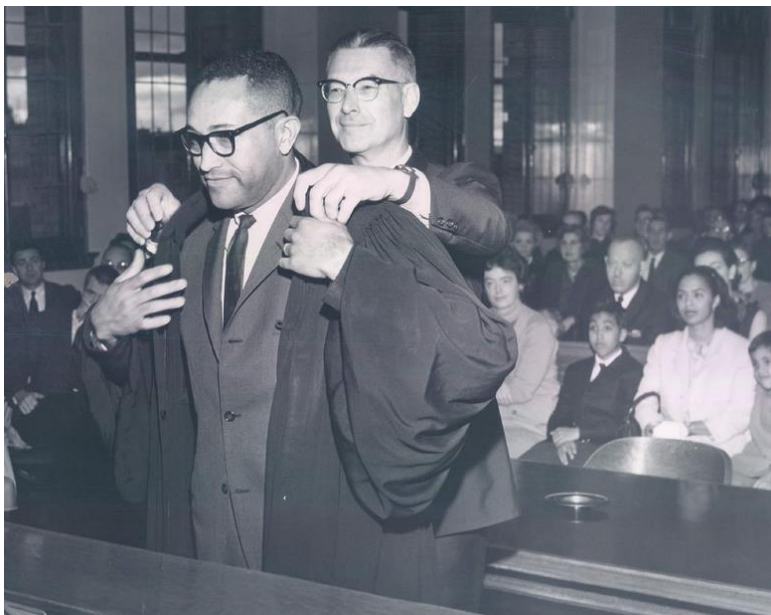
State Supreme Court Justice Charles Z. Smith, who blazed trails for jurists of color, dies

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State Supreme Court Justice Charles Z. Smith plays the piano for his young granddaughter Mahealani in 1988. Gov. Booth Gardner, who appointed him, called him a “bright and collegial judge with a strong social conscience.” (Benjamin Benschneider/Seattle Times)



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Charles Z. Smith receives his robe after being sworn in as a King County Superior Court judge in 1966. (Vic Condiotty/The Seattle Times)



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Judge Charles Z. Smith's musical family serenaded his "promotion" From left- Michael, 9; Stephen, 6; Carlos, 10, the judge's wife, Eleanor; Felicia, 5, and Judge Smith. 11/13/1966 (Roy Scully/The Seattle Times)



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Laymen of First Baptist Church Discussed Teaching Assignments From left, were the Rev. Walter Pulliam, Ralph Cheney, Ray Merriwether, Reino Jarvi, Judge Charles Z. Smith and Judge Robert Utter "We are challenged to provide studies which will implement the learning opportunities of the adult church members," said the Rev. Walter B. Pulliam, Minister of education. January 8, 1966 photo.



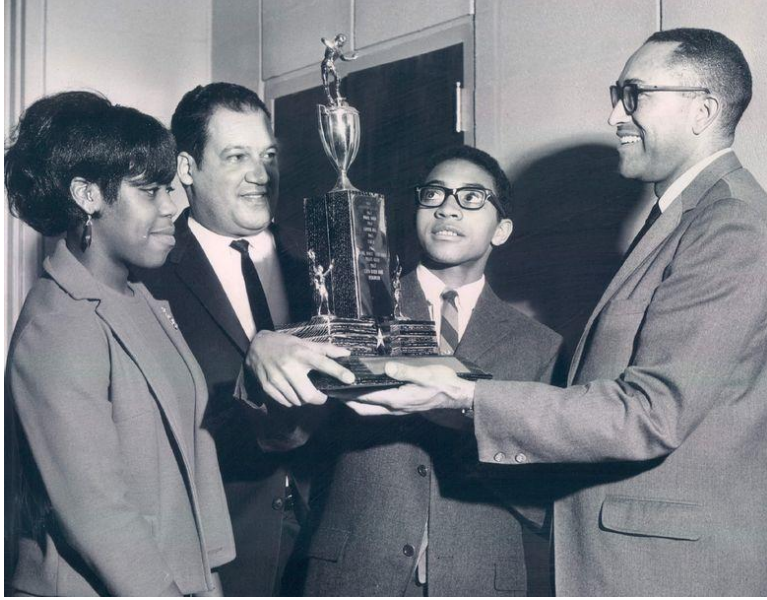
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Members of Friends of Youth, Inc., shoveled for the future Yesterday at ground-breaking ceremonies for a group – home unit of the Griffin Home near Renton. From left were Municipal Judge Charles Z. Smith, Friends of Youth board president; Lulu Fairbanks, corresponding secretary; Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Matsen long time supporters of the aid organization; E. B. Stevens, a volunteer representative, and Mrs George long-time representative The two-level building will expand casework and counseling facilities of the Griffin Home and house ten boys on the upper level. The United Good Neighbors has authorized a \$150,000 fund drive to raise construction funds for the new unit. 8/13/1966



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Superior Court Judge Charles Z. Smith, left, tested keys to the new \$200,000 multipurpose addition to the Griffin Home for Boys at 10198 Lake Washington Blvd. S. E., Renton, during dedication ceremonies. Wayne Strom, executive director of Friends of Youth, Inc., center, and Walter Reid, building-fund- campaign chairman, looked on. 10/2/1967



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Superior Court Judge Charles Z. Smith, right, admired the Greater Seattle Bantam Football League “sportsmanship award” trophy, given last night to the Centra Area Youth Association football team at the C.A.Y.A. awards banquet. Others were, from left, Julia Carter, 15, a member of the C.A.Y.A. track team; Donald H. Alexander, president of the C.A.Y.A., and James Burns, 15, captain of the C.A.Y.A. a football team.
12/4/1967



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The King County Superior Court judges gathered for this photograph in Since then, Judge Henry Clay Agnew has retired, and Judge Keith M. Callow has been appointed to the State Court of Appeals. The judges, from left, front row: Solie Ringold, Ed Henry, F. A. Walterskirchen, George Revelle, Theodore S. Turner, Lloyd Shorett, William Wilkins, Ward Roney, Henry Agnew, Story Birdseye, Donald Gaines, James Mifflin and George

Stuntz. Back row: Nancy Ann Holman, Horton Smith, Keith Callow, Warren Chan, Robert Elston, Stanley Soderland, Howard Thompson, Charles Smith, James Dore, David Soukup, Frank D. Howard, Frank H. Roberts, Jr., and James A. Noe. 1/9/1972

Smith, a civil-rights activist, died Sunday in Seattle at age 89. He was the state's first African-American Superior Court judge and Supreme Court justice.

By [Mike Carter](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

Justice Charles Z. Smith, who rose from the poverty and racism of the Deep South to break ground as Washington's first African-American state trial judge and Supreme Court justice, died Sunday in Seattle. He was 89.

Justice Smith, who worked for more than 50 years as an attorney, also served as an associate dean of the [University of Washington Law School](#), where he graduated and later taught, and worked tirelessly for causes of social justice and human rights. Those efforts included a long fight to win reparations for Japanese Americans who were relocated and interred in camps during World War II.

"He was one of the true giants of Washington law," said Kellye Y. Testy, dean of the UW Law School. "There is not an area where he did not have an influence."

His death was confirmed Monday by a longtime friend and protégé, [Washington Supreme Court Justice Steven González](#), who said Justice Smith "encouraged me early on to consider the judiciary as a career" and helped him win seats on both the King County Superior Court and the Washington Supreme Court.

"He was a mentor to hundreds of people of color across the state," Gonzalez said.

A telephone message left with Justice Smith's family was not immediately returned.

Chief U.S. District Judge Ricardo Martinez said he met the justice in 1977 after applying to the UW Law School. He called him a "trailblazer and a hero."

"He became a mentor to me after I graduated, and we had many discussions on living life as a young lawyer of color in a profession that lacked diversity," Martinez said.

"We have lost a great individual, an incredible jurist and a wonderful man with a strong sense of social justice, who worked so very hard to make his community a better place for all," he said.

Chalia Stallings-Ala'ilima, president of the Loren Miller Bar Association, whose membership consists of attorneys of color, said Justice Smith "blazed a trail for generations to follow.

"His legacy will live on in those of us who are blessed to blossom in his footsteps," she said.

U.S. District Judge Richard Jones, who is African American, said Justice Smith will be remembered for his "eloquence and brilliance on the bench. "

"He has been and always will be a role model of every positive attribute a judge should possess, including humility, graciousness, moral courage and a reputation for fairness," Jones said.

According to an [oral history](#) Smith provided to the Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project at the UW, Charles Zellender Smith was born in 1927 in Lakeland, Fla., and grew up in the segregated South, the son of a Cuban immigrant father and an African-American mother who was the daughter of slaves.

He served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II as a court reporter, and attended and graduated from Temple University in 1952. A lifelong Baptist, he met and befriended Martin Luther King Jr. while he was living in Philadelphia.

Justice Smith moved to Seattle to be close to his mother and was famously accepted to the University of Washington Law School, without having to take the exam, after an associate dean saw his college transcript.

He graduated in 1955, the only African American in his class, and one of only four at the law school at the time.

"He has been a part of this law school for decades," Testy said.

Justice Smith was a civil-rights activist, but of the generation that saw education and integrity — not confrontation — as the key to equality. His [biography](#), "Charles Z. Smith: Trailblazer" on the secretary of state's website, called him a "stealthy subversive."

"Justice Smith will tell you that he was able to open doors — and eventually minds — because his pleasant personality and undeniable ability added up to a 'safe' Negro in the 1950s," one passage reads.

In the oral history, the justice said he wasn't able to find a law firm to hire him after he graduated from law school, so he became the first African-American law clerk at the state Supreme Court, working for Justice Matthew Hill.

He was then hired by the King County Prosecutor's Office, where he worked until 1960, when he attracted the attention of Robert Kennedy, who soon after became U.S. attorney general.

Kennedy hired Justice Smith as a special assistant U.S. attorney in 1961 to help investigate corruption in the Teamsters' pension fund — the investigation that led to the indictment of Teamsters' boss Jimmy Hoffa.

In 1965, Justice Smith returned to Washington state, where he was appointed the first African-American municipal-court judge in Seattle.

In 1966, Gov. Dan Evans appointed him to the King County Superior Court bench, breaking another color barrier.

In 1973, he stepped down to become a professor and associate dean of the law school.

In 1988, Gov. Booth Gardner chose him from among six candidates to become the first African-American Supreme Court justice in the state, calling him a "bright and collegial judge with a strong social conscience."

His last years on the bench were marred by some controversy, after his law clerk was accused of sexual harassment by a woman who said the justice did not do enough to stop the offensive behavior.

[He was forced to retire in 2002](#) when he reached the high court's mandatory retirement age of 75, though he fought to stay on.

The next year, he complained that [other justices had conspired against him](#) and threatened a "tell-all book" to expose them. The book was never published.

Funeral details are pending.

Mike Carter: mcarter@seattletimes.com or 206-464-3706