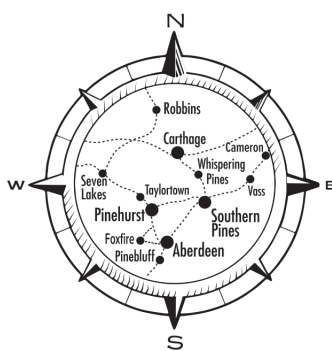




ELENA MARSH / The Pilot

Portrait Honors Retired Superior Court Judge Joe

BY ELENA MARSH
Staff Writer

If anyone were going to have a retirement party full of smiles, belly laughs and tearful goodbyes, it was going to be former Superior Court Judge Regina Joe.

On a sunny Friday afternoon in February, Joe sat among her friends and family who wished her well in her future following a near 36-year career in law and the judiciary system.

"This is a bittersweet time for me," said Joe. "This is a celebratory moment that marks the closure of a love affair between me and what I believe I was called to do, and all of you that I was blessed to do it with."

Throughout the two-hour, well-attended ceremony at the Moore County Courthouse, lines blurred between blood relation and career friendships as family and friends took to the podium to share their appreciation for Joe. Her official portrait was unveiled in a Moore County courtroom, but will be displayed at the Hoke County Courthouse, where she spent much of her career.

An even greater surprise for Joe was receiving the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, the highest civilian award for public service to come out of the state governor's office, following her portrait's presentation.

You are Black history to me, you are women's history to me, and you are definitely a trailblazer.

Chantal Thomas

Former Hoke County Deputy Clerk

MORE ON JUDGE REGINA JOE: **PAGE A9**

SENATE BILLS INTRODUCED

McInnis Pushes Ed Legislation

BY MATT LAMB
Staff Writer

Amid a flurry of activity at the General Assembly on Jones Street in Raleigh this week, Moore County's Senator, Tom McInnis, filed several bills he said are aimed at bolstering local and statewide educational efforts.

Those bills include a measure to remove institutional testing requirements for teachers, school year calendar flexibility for Moore County and the inclusion of 10th-grade students in dual enrollment programs at community colleges.

Senators and representatives from across North Carolina are buzzing in the state's capital as the legislature's long session — held each odd year — is currently underway. Thursday evening marked the filing deadline for any new bills introduced by state senators.

Moore County and its schools figured highly on the docket for McInnis.

Teacher Licensure

S.B. 204 is an effort to repeal the state's standardized testing requirements for teacher licensure. Further, it prohibits the North Carolina State Board of Education from adopting policies that would mandate any standardized testing as a requirement for licensure.

A public bill — meant for the whole state — the measure would allow teachers to attain a three-year renewable license at the request of the local school board.

"The State Board shall not require individuals to demonstrate preparation through achieving a prescribed minimum score on a standardized examination for a limited license," reads the text.

The limited license, according to the bill, would be available to teachers who meet one of two provisions: The teacher was issued an "Initial Professional License" or IPL by the state, or the

see **EDUCATION**, page A8

Upchurch Remembered as Northern Moore Champion

BY MATT LAMB
Staff Writer

A beloved Moore County resident who left his mark on the local school district, Dr. Larry Upchurch, has passed away, having dedicated his life to serving the community.

Upchurch is said to have passed peacefully surrounded by his family. His legacy — marked by ministrations and exalted by those who knew him best — will undoubtedly live on.

A true son of Moore County, Upchurch was born in High Falls in 1948 before attending the local elementary school and graduating from North Moore High. He earned a bachelor's degree from Appalachian State, a Master of Education from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and a doctorate from Campbell University.

see **UPCHURCH**, page A4

NEW PURPOSE FOR OLD CAMPUS

Aberdeen Board OKs New Uses List

BY ANA RISANO
Staff Writer

A live-work-play development proposed for the former Aberdeen Elementary School property has gone through a series of updates in the last two years. And now, it's set up for another review.

On Wednesday, Feb. 26, the Aberdeen Planning Board briefly discussed changes to the list of allowed uses on-site and ultimately recommended approving an expanded list for the property off U.S. 1. It also reviewed a few minor updates to the property layout and density.

Planning Director Pam Graham shared that the ap-

plicant, Flacorp CEO Fabio Lemos, felt the uses were too restrictive when developing the site.

"As he continues to move toward development of the site, he has recognized that the list of uses that were in the planned development document were somewhat limiting, and he was hoping to broaden those to make for a more viable mix of uses on this site," Graham said.

Lemos' company became interested in the project about a year after the Board of Commissioners approved a conceptual development plan for the site in 2022.

see **CAMPUS**, page A4



COURTESY OF THE TOWN OF ABERDEEN

An updated rendering of townhome units, part of the conceptual plan for Aberdeen Station

OPINION

Region Is Ready for Return of The Rock

NASCAR racing is back at The Rock, bringing a huge economic impact with it.

PUBLIC SPEAKING

USGA Reduces Waste

Readers share their views on a number of current events.



SANDHILLS SCENE

'Blooming Art' Is Back in Bloom

Local floral designers take their cue from artwork in this annual exhibit at Campbell House.

SPORTS

Vikings in the Second Round

Union Pines girls basketball takes on Eastern Alamance.

WEATHER FORECAST



TODAY

52°
21°

Sunny
Feels Like: 55°
Precip: 0%
Winds: N at 6 mph



MONDAY

55°
28°

Partly Sunny
Feels Like: 61°
Precip: 0%
Winds: SE at 2 mph



TUESDAY

69°
54°

Warming Up
Feels Like: 68°
Precip: 9%
Winds: S at 9 mph



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JUDGE REGINA JOE FROM PAGE A9



Joe's journey to the courtroom began in 1985, when she graduated from the University of North Carolina with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice administration. In 1988, she completed her Juris Doctor at Campbell University's Norman Adrian Wiggins School of Law.

In 2005 she was appointed by then-Chief Resident Superior Court Judge B. Craig Ellis as the chief public defender for Hoke and Scotland counties. Joe made history by becoming the first Black and first female chief public defender in the history of the state.

A year later Joe ran for and was elected to the position as District Court judge of Judicial District 16A, making history once again as the first Black and the first female judge serving Anson, Richmond and Scotland counties. She would be re-elected to that position in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022. The jurisdiction was dissolved in 2024.

In 2023, then-Gov. Roy Cooper elevated Joe to Superior Court District 19D to serve Moore and Hoke counties, filling a vacancy that was created by the retirement of the Honorable James Webb.

Joe's lasting impact on all of the communities she served is hoped to be forever immortalized in her likeness, painted by artist Michelle Snead.

"Part of my job as a painter is getting to know the person that I am supposed to represent," said Snead. "I found the entire process so very enjoyable. Judge Joe and I spent hours on the telephone before we ever met in person. I feel that I have gained a friend as a result of these interactions."

Snead said she wanted to keep with tradition for the portrait's courthouse destination, but she knew Joe deserved a piece as unique as she is.

For the portrait, Joe chose to wear her robe with a colorful blue collar and a triple strand of pearls. Her backdrop included a draped American flag along the left side of the painting. Snead explained the symbolism in the painting as freedom in the likeness of the American flag, loyalty and sincerity in the color blue, and wisdom, enlightenment and spiritual transformation in the pearls.

"I wanted to include her hands, which I thought were very expressive," said Snead. "Judge Joe told me there were three things that were most important to her in her career: trust, honesty and transparency."

Friends and family each approached the podium to share their appreciation and congratulations for a job well done.

"She had empathy for her clients and wanted to do the right thing as long as the law allowed her to," said Jody Foyles, member of the North Carolina Bar Association and an attorney in Southern Pines.

While doing the right thing in the courtroom was respected, Joe's friendship among her peers was cherished.

"I appreciate you for all the many times that you helped us out. You looked out for us, and we are going to miss you, but you have paid your dues and we congratulate you on your retirement," said Evelyn McLeod, the clerk of Superior Court in Hoke County.

Raeford attorney and member of the North Carolina Bar Association Kristy Newton described how, while she was sad to see Joe leave the stand, she is grateful for the time the two will now get to spend with one another with any perceived conflicts of interest now removed.

"We all know Gigi's professional accolades," said Newton. "She has had a storied career, varied legal experiences, she has done a lot of wonderful things. But the best thing she has ever done is be a friend."

District Attorney Mike Hardin has known Joe since his start in the Hoke and Scotland district over 25 years ago. He called her a friend and tried cases alongside her while she occupied her role as public defender.



PHOTOS BY ELENA MARSH / The Pilot

"I feel that I have gained a friend as a result of these interactions," said portrait artist Michelle Snead, who spent hours with Judge Regina Joe.

"We have tried a lot of cases together, and we always got along pretty well. She was always professional," Hardin said in a telephone interview. "In fact, I tried more cases with her than anyone else while I was down in Hoke County."

As a judge, Joe's transparency was hard to hide, so much so that a "Judge Joe Look" became a moniker for the face she'd make when she questioned the accuracy of what was presented to her.

"She had a look where you could tell she didn't like what she was hearing or if she thought something that wasn't accurate," Hardin said. "GiGi was always knowledgeable, and if there was something she wasn't sure about, she would go look it up to learn what she needed to know."

On the District Court bench, Hardin could not recall a time when Joe was unfair or did not treat everyone in her courtroom with respect.

"No matter if the case went in your favor or not, she gave a fair hearing. You always felt like you got a fair shake," Hardin said.

While neither race nor gender play a significant role in Joe's desire to receive congratulations, the lasting impact of her historic milestones still means a great deal to those following her passion for law.

"Seeing someone that I can look up to, I thank you for who you are. I thank you for having standards and definite-

ly your discipline," said former Hoke County Deputy Clerk Chantal Thomas. "You are Black history to me, you are women's history to me, and you are definitely a trailblazer."

"The mantra I have always carried from Day One and even more so now," said Joe in an interview a few days later, "I have always always said, that whatever it was I stood for, it has never been about me. It is about 'we.'"

"When I stood before all of those folks that day, that was a snapshot of 32-and-a-half plus years that have culminated in where I am now. All of those folks poured into me. The celebration was not for me, it was really a celebration of all of them. My community helped make me what I am, the people around me, from my family to the people around me in school. You put them all together and you get Judge Regina Joe."

Following her retirement, Joe expressed an interest in hiking, something that members of the bar noted. Moore County Bar Association President Austin Chestnut and attorney Marsh Smith presented Joe with a pair of light purple hiking boots from River Jack Outdoor Trading Company in Southern Pines.

In all there were over 10 speakers, some scheduled and others moved by a desire to simply tell Joe how much she meant to them. Joe herself closed the ceremony with her own statement, as a smile spread across her face and tears fell from her eyes.

"In closing, there should be less worries now about the temperature in the courtroom, the noise level in the courtroom or even the 'Judge Joe Look.'"

"But if you happen to take a moment to think about me, consider doing so by greeting another judge or your fellow colleague upon approaching the bench with a light fist bump."

Contact Elena Marsh at (910) 693-2484 or elena@thepilot.com. Staff writer Jonathan Bym contributed to this article.



PROFESSIONAL
TIMELINE

1962: Judge Regina M. Joe was born in Mecklenburg County (Charlotte)

1981: Graduated from Olympic High School in Charlotte

1985: Graduated from the University of North Carolina, where she earned a bachelor's degree in administration of criminal justice.

1988: Graduated from Campbell Law School in Buies Creek, where she earned her Juris Doctor degree

1989-1991: Served as assistant district attorney in Greenville

1991-1995: Served as assistant district attorney in Hoke and Scotland counties

1995-1997: Was in private practice, then worked for the Employment Security Commission

1998-2005: Served as assistant public defender in Hoke and Scotland counties

2005: Was appointed by then-Chief Resident Superior Court Judge B. Craig Ellis as the chief public defender for Hoke and Scotland counties, making history by becoming the first Black female chief public defender in the history of the state

2006: Elected to District Court judge of Judicial District 16A, in Hoke and Scotland counties and in the district attorney's offices in Hoke, Scotland and Pitt counties

2009-2013: Served on the Board of Governors for the NC Association of District Court Judges, specializing in juvenile certification and later serving on the Education Committee

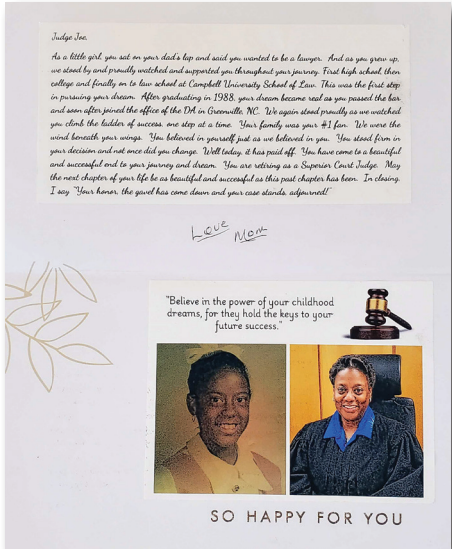
2013-2014: Served as president of the NC Association of District Court Judges, having been elected by her peer District Court judges from across the state

2010: Re-elected to the 16A Judicial District

2014: Re-elected to the 16A Judicial District

2018: Re-elected to the 16A Judicial District

2023: Appointed by then-Gov. Roy Cooper to Superior Court District 19D, serving Hoke and Moore counties, filling the vacancy created by the retirement of the Hon. James Webb



Top, a letter to Joe from her mother; above, Joe displays her Order of the Long Leaf Pine as Judge James Ammons looks on.