

**RICHARD JEFFERSON** 1931-2021

# Pioneering Black lawmaker dies

He led successful effort to recognize Juneteenth in Minnesota.

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Decades before June 19 became a federal holiday, a Minneapolis legislator successfully led the charge for Minnesota to honor the day.

Richard H. Jefferson was a state legislator, chemist and advocate for the city of Minneapolis who as a state representative authored the bill that made Minnesota the fourth state in the country to recognize Juneteenth. Remembered for his sense of humor, his ability to connect

with people and his dedication to his north Minneapolis community, Jefferson died June 28. He was 90.

The cause of death was not immediately known; Jefferson collapsed on the ninth green at Hidden Haven Golf Club in Cedar, Minn., said his wife, former state senator Alice Johnson, who was with him at the time.

Born in 1931 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Jefferson served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, earned a bachelor's degree from Xavier University of Louisiana and became a chemist for the U.S. Bureau of Mines.

It was as a resident of north Minneapolis and long before he ran for political



**Jefferson**

office that Jefferson became involved in urban renewal, said Jackie Cherryhomes, former Minneapolis City Council president. Jefferson was one of the founders of Pilot City, which is now known as Northpoint Health and Wellness Center, and was a co-founder of the Willard Homewood neighborhood organization. He would go on to become chairman of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority and a commissioner for the Metropolitan Sports Facility Commission.

“Our whole community

See **JEFFERSON** on B5 ▶

# Late lawmaker's wife: 'Everybody loved Richard'

◀ **JEFFERSON** from B1 owes him a debt of gratitude for his work," said Cherryhomes, who called Jefferson her "incredibly fabulous friend."

It wasn't until he was in his mid-50s that Jefferson first ran for the state Legislature, becoming in 1987 the representative for the near North area and a portion of downtown Minneapolis. He would go on to serve six terms, bookending an unsuccessful bid for Minneapolis mayor in 1992.

Jefferson was the fifth Black Minnesotan to serve in the Legislature, and for much of his tenure, the only Black member of the state House of Representatives. He authored the Juneteenth legislation in 1996, helped negotiate Minneapolis public facilities financing deals including the 1994 Target Center buyout and the 1998 Convention Center expansion, and in 1997 was the lone mem-

ber of the Minneapolis House delegation to support the new Twins stadium.

State Sen. Bobby Joe Champion said Monday that he's pushing a Senate resolution to recognize Jefferson's contributions to the state; the resolution has also been sent to Gov. Tim Walz's office, he said.

"He gave me some great advice," said former state senator Linda Higgins, who, like other close friends, knew Jefferson as "Jeff." "Try to figure out a connection with everybody you serve with. He found a way to make a connection with everybody."

"I remember him talking about how he would get calls from all over the state from Black residents who kind of viewed him as their elected official, and that he would be someone who listened and understood what they were going through, and could help them out," Higgins said. When

Jefferson retired from the Legislature, he told the in-house newsletter *Session Weekly* that he enjoyed helping people escape the bureaucracy of local government. "That's the power of this office," he said. "It can be, when used properly, a very important tool for helping people."

Jefferson held an annual seafood cookout for decades that drew his family together, first at his house on Washburn Avenue in north Minneapolis and in later years to the cabin he shared with Johnson in Harris, Minn., said his son Matthew.

The cookout combined Jefferson's love of cooking and spending time with his children; he also found time to pursue golf, fishing and gardening, which saw him raising flowers and dozens of cactus in his backyard, Matthew Jefferson said.

"He had a wonderful sense of humor and really enjoyed life, and imparted that with everyone he met," he said.

After leaving the state Legislature, Jefferson and Johnson traveled widely, seeing Cuba,

Mount Kilimanjaro, Russia and other far-flung spots. He told Johnson he was feeling stronger lately, and within the past week had seen most of his children, Matthew Jefferson said.

He recently made a fresh batch of his famous fruit jellies — this time with blackberries, raspberries and blueberries — that he usually had on hand to give to friends and family.

At the golf course shortly before he died, Jefferson remarked at how beautiful the day was, said Johnson.

"Everybody loved Richard," she said. "We had so much fun."

Jefferson is survived by his wife, Alice; four children from his first marriage to Gwendolyn Veronica Jefferson — Keith Jefferson, Stephanie Crosby, Raymond Jefferson and Leonard Jefferson — his child from his second marriage to Mary Louise Jefferson, Matthew Jefferson, and many grandchildren. Services are planned this week with a private burial at Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

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