

Attorney, Activist Harriet McBryde Johnson Dead at Age 50

By Prentiss Findlay
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Harriet McBryde Johnson, a well-known Charleston disability and civil rights attorney, died Wednesday.

"She worked yesterday. It's a shock to everybody," said friend and attorney Susan Dunn.

She was born July 8, 1957, and had been a Charleston resident since age 10.

She told The Post and Courier that she became an attorney because her disability-rights work had taught her something about the impact of law on how people live.

She specialized in helping people who couldn't work get Social Security benefits.

She was chairwoman of the Charleston County Democratic Party executive committee (1988-2001); city party chair (1995-2000); secretary of city party (1989-95); national convention delegate (1996); president, Charleston County Democratic Women (1989-91); County Council candidate (1994); and a certified poll manager.

Funeral arrangements are pending at Fielding Home For Funerals.

Johnson, who was born with a neuromuscular disease, drew national attention for her opposition to "the charity mentality" and "pity-based tactics" of the annual Jerry Lewis muscular dystrophy telethon. Lewis told the Chicago Tribune he had no intention of making peace with opponents such as Johnson. He likened the idea of meeting with them to entertaining Hezbollah or insurgents in Iraq.

The protests started after Lewis wrote a 1990 Parade magazine article in which he imagined being disabled. Among his conclusions, "I realize that my life IS half, so I must learn to do things halfway. I just have to learn to try to be good at being half a person."

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