



# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



# Yvonne Brathwaite Burke

(October 5, 1932 -)

"The First African-American to represent the West Coast in Congress"

"First Sitting Member of Congress to give Birth While Serving"

"Second African-American Woman Elected to Congress"

**Yvonne Brathwaite Burke was born Perle Yvonne Watson** on October 5, 1932, in Los Angeles, California as the only child to James A. Watson and the former Lola Moore Watson. Her father worked as a janitor for MGM Studios while her mother was an elementary school teacher and later a stockbroker. Yvonne grew up in a multi-ethnic neighborhood close to the commercial area of Los Angeles and excelled in academics in school. At the age of 15, she decided that she would eventually attend law school. In 1949 she graduated from high school and left home to attend the University of California at Berkeley where she pledged Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. In her junior year she transferred to the University of California at Los Angeles and earned her undergraduate degree. By moving back in with her parents, she was able to save money to attend law school. In 1956 Yvonne graduated in the top third of her class to earn her juris doctorate from the University of Southern California Law School.



Her political career began in earnest in 1966 when she was elected as the first African-American assemblywoman in California. In the 1966 election, Californians voted four new African American legislators into office, tripling the number of the Golden State's black legislators to a total of six.



The next year, these six legislators, including Yvonne, organized the Legislative Black Caucus, the first caucus of its kind in the United States.

She served three two-year terms in the California legislature as representative of the state's 63rd Assembly District. It was during this time that she met her husband, William Burke. Yvonne's next "first" came when she became the first African-American woman elected to Congress from California (or any state in the American West). She was chosen vice-chair of the 1972 Democratic National Convention, another first for African Americans, and remained in Washington D.C. for one six-year term, from 1972 to 1978.



Yvonne Brathwaite Burke in its March 1973 issue, shortly after the birth of her daughter. As the first sitting Member of Congress to give birth while serving, and the second African-American woman in Congress, Burke's article, "The Kind of World I Want for My Child," offered a unique perspective. The essay covered her responsibilities to her community, the need for increased engagement with politics, and the challenges faced by young people in the 1970s.

*Ebony* magazine featured Representative

While in Congress, Burke also became the first member of Congress to give birth while in office, and the first representative to be granted maternity leave. Autumn, her daughter with husband William A. Burke, a Los Angeles businessman, was born in 1973.

After leaving the nation's capital, she became the first African American member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. In 1980, she joined the law firm of Jones, Day, Reavis, & Pogue, where she practiced law for a decade. She retired in December of 2008.

