

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry
Clerk of Superior Court
DeKalb County



Sylvia Elizabeth Mathis

(July 7, 1949 – October 22, 1983)

“First African-American Woman FBI Agent”

Sylvia Elizabeth Mathis was born July 7, 1949 and was raised in North Carolina and Florida. She graduated from Bishop Kenny High School in Jacksonville, Florida. She earned a bachelor's degree in political science from New York University in 1972 and a Juris Doctor from the University of North Carolina School of Law in 1975. She passed the North Carolina Bar. On the suggestion of her law school dean, a former FBI Agent, she applied and was accepted to the FBI training program.



On February 17, 1976, at the age of 26, Sylvia arrived at the FBI Training Headquarters in Quantico, Virginia to begin the four month grueling training program. She was motivated to become not only an FBI agent, but also the first female African-American agent. Her historic appointment for the FBI training program made the front page news of her hometown newspaper, The Carolina Times – February 21, 1976 issue. At the time, only 41 agents out of a total of 8,500 in the country were women - and none were African-American. Before Sylvia, two other African-American women attempted the training, but were unsuccessful. Although Sylvia struggled through the physical fitness test and had challenges on the gun range, she did not quit.

On June 2, 1976, Special Agent #2658, Sylvia Mathis, made history when she received her FBI badge & credentials, a leather attaché case, a plain black purse, and a Smith & Wesson revolver with a snub-nosed barrel short enough to fit inside the purse. Her first assignment in the New York Field Office was working with the organized crime squad, investigating illegal gambling and extortion cases. She worked a variety of other matters, including handling short-term undercover duties and interviewing survivors of the 1978 massacre in Jonestown, Guyana.

Three years later, Sylvia left the FBI and began working as an attorney in New York, as an advisor to the Office of Legal Counsel from 1979-80. She then returned to Jacksonville, Florida to care for her parents in 1982. Back in Florida, she was named director of the city's Downtown Ecumenical Services Council, which provided emergency support to homeless and unemployed residents of the city.

Tragically, Sylvia Elizabeth Mathis's life was cut short when she was killed in a car accident on October 22, 1983. She was 34 years old.



Miss Sylvia E. Mathis, a graduate of the University of North Carolina Law School, became the first black female to be recruited as a special agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. She began fourteen weeks of training February 14 at Quantico, Va. She is a native of Durham. She was presented her letter of appointment by Louis A. Giovanetti, special agent in charge of the FBI office in Charlotte. UPI