

# The Clerk's Black History Series



## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



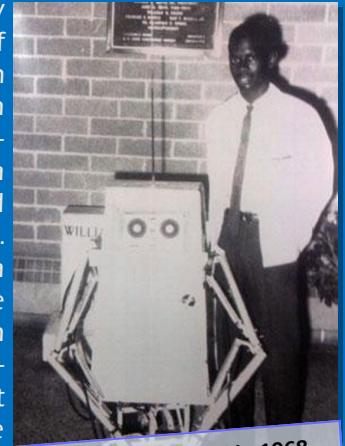
# Lonnie G. Johnson

## Engineer and Inventor of the SuperSoaker

( b. October 6, 1949 )



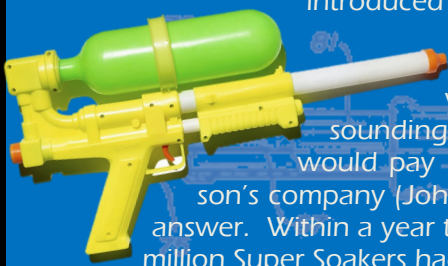
Lonnie George Johnson was born October 6, 1949 in Mobile, Alabama. As a child in the 1960s, Lonnie showed a brave curiosity and a natural inclination for engineering and inventing. His father, a World War II veteran, taught Lonnie and his brother the value of repairing household items. Lonnie's inquisitive nature and propensity for invention led to him nearly burning down the family house trying to create rocket fuel out of sugar and saltpeter and building a go-cart out of scrap metal and an old lawn mower motor. Lonnie's talents became more refined in Williamson High School where he entered a national science competition sponsored by the University of Alabama. There he displayed a remote controlled robot named "Linex" which he built from scraps and spare parts from his brother's walkie-talkie and his sister's reel-to-reel. He won first place with "Linex" and entered Tuskegee University on a Mathematics scholarship. While at Tuskegee, he was elected into the Pi Tau Sigma National Engineering Honor Society and graduated with distinction in 1973 with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering and a Master's Degree in Nuclear Engineering. After graduation, Johnson went



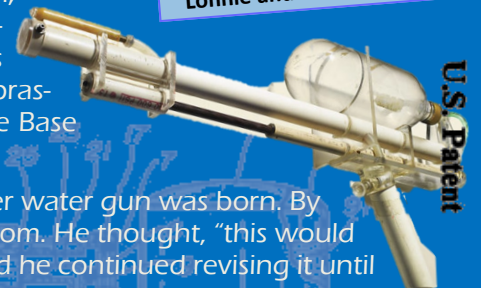
Lonnie and "Linex" in 1968.

on to work in the field of thermal analysis on plutonium fuel spheres, joined the U.S. Air Force where he served as the Acting Chief of the Space Nuclear Power Safety Section, worked for NASA as the Senior Systems Engineer at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and worked on the Galileo Mission to Jupiter. In 1982, Johnson returned to his military career, working at the Strategic Air Command (SAC) facility in Bellevue, Nebraska and then moved to the SAC Test and Evaluation Squadron at Edwards Air Force Base in Edwards, California where he worked on the Stealth Bomber.

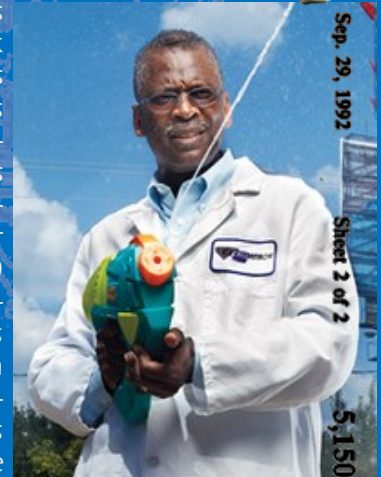
In 1982, while Johnson was developing an eco-friendly heat pump, the Super Soaker water gun was born. By accident, his heat pump invention created a stream of water that shot across the room. He thought, "this would make a great water gun." He called his initial invention a "pneumatic water gun" and he continued revising it until it could shoot almost 50 feet. After a series of rejections for two years, Johnson was



introduced to Al Davis, an executive with Larimi Corp., at a New York City Toy Fair. Two weeks later, Johnson was in Larimi's headquarters in Philadelphia with company executives watching a demonstration of his invention. With a resounding "Wow" their only question was whether consumers would pay \$10.00 for a water gun. After signing a deal with Johnson's company (Johnson Research and Development Co., Inc.) they had their answer. Within a year they knew they had a hit. Within 10 years more than 200 million Super Soakers had been sold. The Super Soaker became the toy of the decade. Johnson continued inventing and would eventually hold more than 80 patents. For his contributions to science (and in light of his great success with the Super Soaker) Johnson was inducted into the Inventor Hall of Fame in 2000. His company has continued to innovate, creating improved radon detectors, heat pumps and lithium battery products as well as new toy concepts. Johnson is a part of a small group of African-American inventors whose work accounts for 6 percent of all U.S. patent applications. Johnson operates his companies in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood of Atlanta, Georgia, where he lives with his wife and four children.



U.S. Patent



Sep. 29, 1992

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