

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



## Zandra Iona Flemister

(November 21, 1951 – February 21, 2023)

“First Black Woman to Serve as a U.S. Secret Service”

**Zandra Iona Flemister** was born November 21, 1951, in Frankfurt, Germany, while her father served in the U.S. Army. When the family returned to the U.S., they settled in central Connecticut. Zandra's mother, Pearl, was active in the Civil Rights Movement and brought Zandra along with her to the 1963 March on Washington. At age 16, Zandra was part of the Poor People Campaign March on Washington, following the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King. After graduating high school in 1969, she attended Northwestern University, earning a bachelor's degree in political science in 1971. It was during a job fair that Zandra met a Secret Service recruiter who told her that although she was overqualified for the uniformed service, she should apply to be a special agent. She was hired and moved to work at the Washington field office.

On Aug. 5, 1974, she became the first black woman to serve as a United States Secret Service Agent. Initially, Zandra worked undercover, assigned to investigate counterfeit and treasury fraud. Later she was assigned to protective details for Vice Presidential candidate, Bob Dole's wife, Elizabeth, as well as the daughters of both President Gerald Ford and President Jimmy Carter. In 1976 she suffered a serious concussion in an auto accident during the presidential campaign.

“Lady Bird Johnson” the wife of former President Lyndon B. Johnson, had lifetime Secret Service protections and would often request Zandra to attend social events. Zandra once learned to ski in order to accompany President Ford on a skiing trip.

Although her professionalism impressed some notable subjects, many of Zandra's male peers regularly mocked her notoriety for being the first and only black woman to serve in this capacity. She was subject to ridicule by her superiors for her natural hairstyle and it was reported that colleagues taped a picture of a gorilla over her photo ID and regularly used racially derogatory terms. Although Zandra had a reputation for being unflappable in a crisis, she soon realized that she could not advance her career with the secret service.

In 1978, Zandra left the Secret Service agency and joined the State Department where she remained for 30 years. She married in 1981 and had one son. During her time with the State Department Foreign Service interagency, she managed visa screening programs in Pakistan and South Korea, established a multinational anti-visa fraud working group in London, and worked extensively on counter-narcotics in Pakistan. She advanced to the rank of Senior Foreign Service Officer.

In 2000, Zandra provided an affidavit in support of a class action racial discrimination lawsuit against the Secret Service, with more than one hundred former agents joining the suit. Following her exit from the Secret Service, the retention rate for Black female special agents was so poor that by 2001, not one black woman had served long enough to retire from the agency. The Secret Service ultimately reached a \$24 million settlement in 2017, with the agency promising to change its promotion procedure but denying any wrongdoing or institutional prejudice.

In 2003, Zandra earned a master's degree in national security logistics from the National Defense University. Soon after, she started experiencing serious memory loss, due to early onset dementia. She retired in 2011. On February 21, 2023, Zandra Iona Flemister died from respiratory failure brought on by Alzheimer's disease.

In October 2023, the Center for International Affairs and World Cultures of Northwestern University established the Flemister Fellows. The endowed fund honors her legacy by supporting students studying in the field of international relations. The fund supports undergraduate students from underserved populations with financial need, with a preference for first generation college students. Each recipient is awarded a blue rose pin, which is a symbolic representation of support among Black women in the Secret Service.



President Ford and Special Agent Zandra Flemister



Agent Zandra Flemister escorting Prime Minister of Jamaica, Michael Manley (far right)

