



# March 16, 1998 Wyandotte Distinguished Graduate Inductee



## Denise (Reinka) Johnson Class of 1965

Denise (Reinka) Johnson has distinguished herself professionally as a lawyer, a judge, and currently, as an Associate Justice of the Vermont State Supreme Court.

As a student at Roosevelt High School, Ms. Johnson laid the basis for her career. She co-edited the Wy-News and the school yearbook, earning her the honor of Quill and Scroll Membership. She was also a member of the National Honor Society, the World As A Community Class, and participated in Student Government Day.

From Roosevelt, Ms. Johnson went on to Wayne State University, earning a Bachelor's Degree in English in 1969. In 1974, she earned her law degree, with honors, from the University of Connecticut; in 1995, she earned a Master's Degree in Law (LLM) from the University of Virginia.

Justice Johnson's career as an attorney, both in private practice and in the Attorney General's Office, led to her 1990 appointment to the Vermont Supreme Court. She is the first woman in Vermont's history to hold this position.

As a lawyer and a judge, Justice Johnson has worked to improve the legal profession and the community. She has been a planner and presenter of Continuing Legal Education Programs for the Vermont Bar Association on employment law, human rights, appellate practices, and state constitutionalism.

As a judge, her public activities have focused on improving the administration of justice. Justice Johnson chaired the Gender Bias Implementation Committee, which was successful in putting the recommendations of the Gender Bias Task Force into practice. She currently chairs the Equal Access to Justice Committee which is working to eliminate barriers that are suffered by people of color, those that speak a foreign language, or those unable to afford legal representation.

Justice Johnson has also taken a leadership role in increasing the level of pro bono participation in the Vermont Volunteer Lawyers Project, a program that provides free legal counsel for eligible clients in civil cases. She chaired the Successful Advisory Committee on Gender Inclusive Language in the constitution, which after public hearings, ultimately recommended to the Supreme Court that Gender Neutral Amendments be submitted to a vote of the people of Vermont. The proposition passed.

In 1995 and 1996, Justice Johnson was a participant in a colloquy exploring the Ethical, Legal, Social Implications of the Human Genome Project, conducted by the Virginia Health Policy Center at the University of Virginia. This provided a select group of judges and journalists the opportunity to learn the historical and scientific background of genetic issues that are likely to arise in their work and to debate the underlying ethical considerations of scientific research.

Justice Johnson's contributions to her profession were recognized by her peers in 1997 when she was elected to the American Law Institute, on the basis of her professional achievement and demonstrated interest in the improvement of law.

Justice Johnson and her husband Thomas Wies are the proud parents of two children and reside in Middlesex, Vermont.