



State Representative Gwendolyn Sawyer Cherry

State Representative Gwendolyn Sawyer Cherry was the daughter of Miami's Black pioneer doctor William B. Sawyer and she championed many "firsts" as a Black woman in Florida. She was the first Black person to be admitted to the University of Miami's School of Law, the first Black female lawyer in the State of Florida in 1965,¹ the first civilian to serve as legal assistant with the Coast Guard, and the first Black female Florida State Representative from 1970 until 1979. In her role as a State Representative, Cherry was a champion for the poor and the oppressed, and she was particularly involved in advancing social programs and equal rights for minorities and women. She advocated tirelessly, alongside Black and white women, for the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would have guaranteed equal legal rights for all Americans, regardless of sex. During her four terms in the State Legislature, she introduced the Equal Rights Amendment, the Martin Luther King Jr. Day state holiday, chaired the state's committee for International Women's Year in 1978, and co-authored *Portraits in Color: the Lives of Colorful Negro Women* with Pauline Willis and Ruby Thomas.^{2,3} She also chaired the Minority Affairs Committee for the Democratic National Convention and the National Women's Political Caucus in 1972 while serving as legal counsel for the National Organization for Women (NOW)'s Miami chapter.⁴



Image. Images of State Representative Gwen Cherry. (Source: Florida Memory).

Representative Cherry was friends with Governor Bob Graham and his wife Adele Graham and was the first person to meet with the Governor on his first day in office in Tallahassee in January 1979. She died in a tragic and perplexing single-vehicle car accident in Tallahassee on February 7, 1979, just as she was making significant progress on policies for social reform.⁵ Cherry lived in Brownsville on NW 46 Street with her husband James Cherry since at least the time of their marriage in 1960 until her death in 1979.⁶ Her house was built on land that her father Dr. Sawyer purchased from wealthy Black farmers, Samuel and Laura Wilson. Cherry's twenty-year ascent into law and politics took place while living in Brownsville in this home. Brownsville's role as a powerful voting bloc during the 1960s and 1970s played an important role in Cherry's election as the first Black female State legislator in Florida.

¹ "Only Negro Woman Lawyer Hopes to Inspire Others" *The Miami Herald*, December 27, 1966 p53 <https://www.newspapers.com/image/621887827> Accessed May 18, 2023

² "Gwendolyn Sawyer Cherry". Archived from the original on 2015-02-04. Retrieved 2013-10-23.

³ ^ Cherry, Gwendolyn (July 15, 1962). *Portraits in Color: The Lives of Colorful Negro Women*. Pageant Press. ISBN 9780598561916 – via Google Books.

⁴ "Gwendolyn S. Cherry « Gwen S. Cherry Black Women Lawyers Association". Archived from the original on December 3, 2013.

⁵ "Rep. Cherry killed in crash" *The Miami News*, February 8, 1979 p1, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/302583664> Accessed June 1, 2023.

⁶ "2 Educators Repeat Vows" *The Miami Herald*, May 18, 2023 p76 <https://www.newspapers.com/image/619356463> May 18, 2023

A famous first for Dade: frontrunner Gwen Cherry

Firsts are not exactly new for Gwen Cherry, who has made Florida history by being the first black woman elected to the Legislature.

Mrs. Cherry was Dade County's first black woman lawyer.

She was the first black woman civilian attorney for the Seventh District of the U.S. Coast Guard.

She wrote the first biographical book on black women, "Portraits in Color," which is now in school and public libraries.

When she was a teacher, some of the children she taught were the first black students to win National Science and Westinghouse Awards.

She opened the first EOPI legal service office in the South.

But she was only the second black woman in the South to get a master's degree in human relations. Her godmother was the first.

Despite her trailblazing, Mrs. Cherry says she doesn't look on herself as an aggressive female.

"An over-achiever, maybe," she said. "But aggressive, not quite."

The moving force in her rise as a black leader both in her profession and politics,

she says, has been to set an example for young blacks to follow.

"When I was teaching, I would tell the kids you can do this and that when you grow up but they didn't believe. They'd say, 'no, no . . . maybe in the theatrical world, but no place else.'"

"I'd tell them they could be scientists and professors and they wanted living examples. Well, they're seeing a living example in me and in others. It can be done. That's one of the reasons I wrote my book, to show them there were other women who made it, too."

Mrs. Cherry, 47, has combined her professional career with being a housewife and the mother of two children. Her husband is James Cherry, a coordinator in the adult education division, Dade County school system.

She won the 96th District legislative seat in a second-primary runoff against Harvey Rubin and she has no Republican opposition in the Nov. 3 general election.

"To go from one of the highest appointive jobs in the South as Coast Guard attorney to an elected position in which I was chosen by the people to represent them, is something to cherish," Mrs. Cherry said.

"I guess the time was right. The people of Dade County are fair. They want to see

democracy in action and they displayed it."

While she intends to represent all the people, Mrs. Cherry said she will note with particular interest legislation regarding women and blacks.

"I think these are two groups that have been left out of the mainstream for a long time. You know, you can't just stand aside and criticize. I think this is where the answer is going to be. Women and blacks have to get more political power to make meaningful changes."

One of Mrs. Cherry's prime goals is legislation to establish a women's bureau for Florida to see that, among other things, women get equal pay for equal work. She also wants stronger consumer protection and laws regarding immunization of school children strengthened.

A native Miamian who was "born in the shadow of the courthouse," Mrs. Cherry says she's lived here long enough to be aware of the critical needs.

Her father, Dr. W. B. Sawyer, was the first black physician in Dade County, and was a founder and chief of staff of the Christian Hospital for 20 years.

A former Dade County teacher, Mrs.

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Gwen Cherry has series of firsts to her credit



Image. Representative Gwen Cherry and others marching in support of the Equal Rights Amendment in Tallahassee, 1975. (Source: Florida Memory).

Image. 1970 article. (Source: The Miami News).

Image. 1966 newspaper article. (Source: the Miami Herald).

Only Negro Woman Lawyer Hopes To Inspire Others

By NANCY BETH JACKSON
Miami Staff Writer

Gwendolyn Sawyer Cherry, pausing between civil law cases, considered her position as the only Negro woman lawyer in the state.

"You get a double dose of prejudice when you're both a Negro and a woman lawyer," she decided.

But as the one-man legal department in the Coconut Grove Neighborhood Center of the Economic Opportunity Program, she has her hands too full of family law and landlord-tenant suits to worry about prejudice.

The 43-year-old mother of four launched her legal career ("a retirement career,"

she laughs) last year after 17 years as a high school teacher. (Her husband James is coordinator of the Northwestern Adult Education Center).

She changed professions mid-stream partly out of interest and partly to show her Negro students that if she went back to school for a new career at her age it should be that much easier for them at theirs.

'I'm Hoping To Inspire . . .'

"I'M HOPING to inspire young people," said the mother of a PhD candidate in chemistry and a Florida Atlantic University student (two teenagers live at home). "All the initiative has been knocked out of them. Professors look way out of reach."

While a teacher, she compiled "Portraits in Color," a book now found in local public school libraries, with words of encouragement from successful Negro professionals in many fields.

By all rights, Mrs. Cherry should have been a doctor (her undergraduate work is in science) to follow in the foot-steps of her father, a physician who founded the community's first Negro hospital, Christian, in 1918.

Instead she chose teaching, piling up credentials including a master's in human relations from New York University.

Using her new law background to help supervise her late father's investments (the Mary Elizabeth Hotel and the Alberta Heights housing project), she represents one of the "old" Negro families in the area.

"There aren't too many native Negro families in the area," she said. "I don't know if the opportunities are broad enough here for them to stay. Things are just beginning to open up."

Being Only One Is Lonesome

SHE OPENED UP one opportunity by being the first Negro to enroll in the University of Miami law school. (She finished her degree at Florida A&M). Fellow (male) classmates kid-

ded her about getting to the kitchen because was a woman rather because of her race.

"They adjusted very to me," Mrs. Cherry said. "There was some adjustment on both sides."

Following her stint the EOP program, she to open her own practice that time, another woman, now in law may give her some company at bar meetings.

"It's kind of lonely being the only one in da," she said.



—Herald Staff Photo by EAMON KENNEDY
'I'm Kind of Lonesome . . .'
... says attorney Gwendolyn Cherry