

## Bonnie Watson Coleman, Thomas Edison State University, Class of 1985

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*TESU alumna Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman received the Civility in Government and Politics Award at a Stockton University Hughes Center program on November 9th. She is pictured with former Vice President Joe Biden, who gave the keynote address for*

When asked to describe her life's work, U.S. Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman responded without equivocation: "My profession is advocacy. My job is and always has been to fight on behalf of economically and socially disadvantaged populations and other vulnerable groups in society."

When asked how she trained to enter the profession of advocacy, she said that her passion for advocacy comes from within, not from an external textbook. She did acknowledge, however, that she became a "far better advocate," thanks to obtaining her BA from Thomas Edison State University (TESU – then Thomas Edison State College) in 1985, just three years after Dr. George Pruitt was appointed president of the college.

"I was an adult learner .... The course work was very challenging, but Thomas Edison made getting my degree easier, because it accommodated my fulltime work schedule, my responsibilities to my family, and took into consideration the academic value of what I learned through my professional work. Most importantly, when I got the degree, all the barriers for my moving forward in my profession in government and advocacy were eliminated," said Congresswoman Watson Coleman, who was 40 when she obtained her degree. And moving forward on behalf of "those often left behind" is something she has done with focus and an unwavering commitment.

Bonnie Watson Coleman, a native of Camden, now lives in Ewing Township with her husband, the Rev. William E. Coleman, Jr., and they have three sons and three grandchildren. Serving her second term in the United States Congress representing New Jersey's 12<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, Rep. Watson Coleman had served eight consecutive terms in the New Jersey General Assembly. She shattered racial and gender barriers to become the first African American woman to serve as Assembly majority leader, and as the chair of the New Jersey Democratic State Committee. Her election to the House of Representatives makes her the first African American woman to represent New Jersey in Congress.

Even before becoming an assemblywoman and congresswoman, Ms. Watson Coleman had amassed an impressive career in "rights" advocacy. In 1974, she established the first Office of Civil Rights, Contracts Compliance and Affirmative Action, in the New Jersey Department of Transportation and remained the director of that office for six years. In 1980, Ms. Watson Coleman joined the Department of Community Affairs, where she held a number of positions including assistant commissioner, responsible for the divisions on Aging, Community Resources, Public Guardian and Women.

TESU President Pruitt noted that Congresswoman Watson Coleman is the daughter of the much-revered NJ Democratic leader John S. Watson, who served in the General Assembly for six terms and for whom the University's Institute of Public Policy and School of Public Service and Continuing Studies is named. Dr. Pruitt introduced the congresswoman at a recent awards ceremony and said she grew up absorbing her father's guiding principle – to serve.

“She was indoctrinated by a family legacy of public service .... She looks for truth, the right thing to do with no aspiration for power or self-aggrandizement. She has the biggest heart of anyone I have ever met in public service,” he said, during his remarks at a Stockton University Hughes Center for Public Policy event on November 9, 2017, at which the congresswoman was among the honorees.

In her acceptance speech of the “Civility in Government and Politics Award,” Congresswoman Watson Coleman acknowledged her faith and thanked God for “this opportunity to be here and for the ability to give back.” When creating and implementing initiatives to help others (whether as an elected official or a private citizen volunteer), she said she has tried over the years to get to know and work with those who are from a “different political and socio-economic background” and outside of her “comfort zone.”

“The example that sticks in my mind occurred when I was on Stockton University's Board of Trustees,” said the congresswoman, who was a member of The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey Board of Trustees from 1981 to 1998 and was its chair from 1990 to 1991. “Stockton was in the throes of change, and the meeting schedule for trustees was intense. It was a long commute, so another board member, Charles Townsend, and I decided to carpool. He was white, rich, Harvard University educated, Mainline Philadelphia heritage, career Republican, a thriving Wall Street executive. Neither one of us was someone that the other one would have sought out to befriend. But during the course of many hours of commuting, both of us got beyond the stereotypes .... We began seeing one another as individuals rather than categories, and we became great friends. I know I learned from him and I think he learned from me.”

The New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities (NJASCU) also learned a lot from her, when she served on the NJASCU board of trustees from 1987 to 1998 and as its chair from 1991 to 1993.

“The key to doing any initiative in public service is finding common ground for the common good. I pray others see the benefit to doing the same,” she said.