

DEBORAH BATTS

b. April 13, 1947

d. February 3, 2020

FIRST OUT FEDERAL JUDGE

“I’m a mother, I’m an African American. I’m a lesbian.”

Deborah Batts was the first openly gay federal judge. She presided over prominent cases involving political corruption, terrorism and criminal justice. A trailblazer for women, African Americans and LGBTQ people, she is remembered as a devoted jurist whose humanity inspired generations of lawyers.

**She was the
first openly gay
federal judge.**

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Batts graduated from Harvard Law School in 1972. She worked in private practice before becoming an assistant U.S. attorney in the Criminal Division of the Southern District of New York. In 1984 she joined Fordham University as a law professor.

In 1994, President Clinton nominated Batts for a federal judgeship. Her sexual orientation, about which she was open, was not an issue. The Senate unanimously confirmed her. Batts, who addressed her sexual orientation publicly, did not want to be known for that single aspect of her identity. “I’m a mother, I’m an African American, I’m a lesbian, I’m a former professor,” she said.

Batts presided over many high-profile cases, including the decade-long civil litigation brought by the Central Park Five, a group of minority youth who were wrongly convicted of the widely publicized assault and rape of a female jogger in 1989. In 2007 Batts denied the motion to dismiss the case against the City of New York, which led to a \$41 million settlement. She presided over the civil lawsuit in which New York residents accused the former EPA Administrator, Christine Todd Whitman, of making misleading statements about the air quality at the World Trade Center site after the attacks of September 11.

A lifelong advocate for equality and justice, Batts worked closely with a mentoring program that sought to increase diversity among lawyers appointed for indigent defenders. She also worked with RISE, a program aimed at reducing recidivism among at-risk offenders.

Batts’s presence on the bench served as an inspiration for the openly gay federal judges who followed. According to Judge Pamela Chen, Batts “literally broke down the closet door and allowed the rest of us to walk through it.”

Batts died at age 72. She is survived by her wife, Dr. Gwen Zornberg, and her children, Alexandra and James McCown.



© NY LAW JOURNAL

