

**REMARKS FOR PRESIDENT RHONDA SKILLERN-JONES
HATTIE MAE WHITE, HEMAN SWEATT MURAL**

Monday, November 5

I stand before you today, college-educated and president of the HISD school board, in part thanks to Hattie Mae White and Heman Sweatt.

Both were trailblazers for the civil rights movement.

Hattie Mae White was the first African-American elected to public office in Texas in the 20th century.

That office... was for trustee of the Houston Independent School District Board of Education.

The year was 1958.

It's been said that Hattie Mae White ran for election because she heard another parent say that the time had not yet come for a black school board member.

She proved them wrong.

And in accomplishing what many said was impossible... she dared others to dream of what's possible.

The same can be said for Heman Sweatt.

When he was denied admission to the University of Texas Law School in 1946 because of the state's segregation laws, he filed a landmark lawsuit in district court.

The state responded by creating a law school at Texas State University for Negroes, now Texas Southern University, my alma mater.

But Sweatt insisted on attending U-T's law school.

So he took his case all the way to the U-S Supreme Court.

And he WON.

The highest court in the land agreed that separate is NOT equal.

It's not equal at law schools; or at elementary, middle, or high schools; or anywhere.

The U-T decision literally opened doors nationwide for African-Americans.

It set a new precedent.

Both Heman Sweatt and Hattie Mae White pursued equality and justice despite the risks to themselves and their families.

They both endured threats.

Sweatt's friends at U-T would walk him to his car because they feared for his safety.

After Hattie Mae White's election victory, someone shot out the windshield of her car.

Someone set a gasoline-soaked cross on fire in the front yard of her home, where she raised five children.

But she – and Sweatt – persevered, because they knew they were fighting not only for their own rights and the rights of their children, but for children in generations to come.

Like me and MY five children.

Even after their victories, White and Sweatt continued to push for desegregation, and continued to speak out against racism and inequality.

They were not able to accomplish all of their objectives in their lifetimes:

Integration, at least in Houston, would take decades... and, of course, the battle against racism and inequality still rages today.

But Hattie Mae White proved that African-Americans CAN win political office in Houston, and her election helped promote more political activism and engagement among minorities.

Because of Heman Sweatt, African-Americans CAN attend whatever university they choose.

They both opened the door of opportunity a little wider, so more of us could walk through.

They left a legacy that has had a profound impact on education in Texas, and in the nation.

I am proud to be a part of this newest honor, to recognize them as they are included in this mural.

It is a fitting tribute to the historic contributions that they made, and it is appropriate that just as they changed our political landscape, they are, literally, a beautiful part of our landscape today.

Thank you.