

Edna Minor Johnson



Edna Minor Johnson died on September 29, 2023, at the age of 97. She was born September 5, 1926, in New Orleans, LA to Theodore Minor and Madeline Sears Minor. Ted, a former railroad worker from Woodville, Mississippi, became one of New Orleans most prominent entrepreneurs by forming Progressive Insurance Company. Madeline, originally from St. Francisville, LA was a loving, religious woman who espoused self-respect and dignity. In addition to her parents, Edna is preceded in death by her sister Leah Zeno and brother Ted Minor Jr., aka Brother.

Edna's parents instilled in her and her siblings the importance of maintaining a classy yet unobtrusive image. Edna was employed by her father at a young age to manage his books and count his money. She shared "Working for my father gave me a sense of independence and joy because I was able to help."

Edna was the first in the family to attend college. She graduated from Southern University in Baton Rouge, LA having pledged Sigma Gamma Rho, with a degree in Home Economics. It was there that she met Vernon C. Johnson, whom she described as smart, kind, patient and a phenomenal card player. They married shortly after graduation and soon had their first child Marcia. They also purchased the home Edna was raised in from her aunt and uncle. That home on Cherokee Street remains in our family.

Even though they returned to New Orleans, the Johnsons were always focused on moving forward. Vernon was soon accepted into the graduate program at the University of Wisconsin, so the young family packed up and moved to Madison. Soon thereafter they welcomed their son Evans. Upon Vernon earning his PhD in Agricultural Economics, the family moved to Greensboro, NC where Vernon taught at North Carolina A&T University. It was there that he and a few other professors were the first African-Americans recruited to join the U.S. State Department in the USAID division. Soon he, Edna, Marcia and Evans were headed overseas.

For the next two decades, the Johnsons lived and worked in India (1957-1960), Nigeria (1960-1968), Uganda (1968-1970), and Tanzania (1970-1974). While Vernon was learning the lay of the land, Edna launched her own unofficial career. She was the de facto leader of the other U.S. diplomatic wives who were, in turn, in charge of entertaining and nourishing their counterparts and important guests overseas.

While Edna was not directly involved in diplomatic work, she provided the critical social support to elevate Vernon's career. Diplomacy, after all, involves much finesse: it is more art than

science. Edna proved to be a master entertainer and enthralled a host of congress persons and senators, along with the likes of former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, First Lady Patricia Nixon, future First Lady Barbara Bush, and Congressman John Lewis. Vernon Johnson, the proud son of an enslaved man from Mississippi, rose to become Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. That would not have happened without Edna Minor Johnson.

Edna was well prepared for a life that most could only dream of. She was not only a wife to Vernon but a business partner. In order to be an outstanding hostess, she had to look the part. Edna was known for her stylish attire, beautiful jewelry, and elegance. “You have to be dignified.”

The couple survived violent upheavals in post-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa—most notably the murderous regime of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, which forced their family to abandon its post or risk calamity. Leaving Uganda meant Edna had to say goodbye to Amin’s four wives, whom she adored despite the excesses of their husband. Edna and Vernon returned to the States permanently when they became grandparents to Simone, James III, Ashland, and Milan Griffin. Silver Spring, Maryland, was her home since 1979.

When Vernon retired from Foreign Service, after serving as USAID Mission Director in Uganda and Tanzania (1968-1973) and as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Edna remained active in the Washington, D.C. area. She served as treasurer of the local YWCA, president of the Silver Spring Kappa Alpha Psi Silhouettes, distinguished positions in the Democratic Club, and volunteered at the polls during elections. One might assume that she relaxed a bit in her declining years, but Edna continued to work in her church, and support her family. Edna Johnson was a woman of determination, sophistication, world travel, and honor. She prided herself on taking care of loved ones, including her husband, children, grandchildren, numerous family members, and in her final years doting on her beloved great-grandchildren. For Edna's grandchildren, the word “consistency” best defines her. She was always present and available for love. Whether it was holding a secret, getting a child to take their medication, being spooned to get to sleep, or spending quality time watching the Golden Girls and 227, they got what they needed and wanted. Everyone felt unconditionally supported and loved.

Mrs. Johnson leaves behind her children Marcia and Evans; her favorite son-in-law Jim; four grandchildren Simone (Kirk), James III, Ashland (Kathy), and Milan; four great-grandchildren Akoya, Audrey, Kaden and Kenji Griffin; niece Shanelle James (Giles), nephews Reginald Zeno, Brandon James (Janika), and Kelvin Johnson; and countless other family and friends. Special thanks go to the brothers of the Silver Spring chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc, particularly Ken Morris and caretakers Jeannie, Maria and Thomas. Edna was a major source of stability in the lives of everyone she loved. While she was often behind the scenes throughout her 97 years of existence, it is abundantly clear that those scenes would not have been nearly as complete—nor as beautiful—without her.