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N.J. Senate committee unanimously approves first Black woman to state Supreme Court

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A powerful Senate committee on Monday unanimously paved the way to seat the first Black woman on New Jersey's highest court.

The Senate Judiciary Committee voted 11-0 to make Fabiana Pierre-Louis a state Supreme Court justice, setting her up to be confirmed by the full Senate Thursday.

"This nomination is truly the honor of a lifetime," said Pierre-Louis, a 39-year-old daughter of Haitian immigrants.

Experience as a prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's office, and as a defense lawyer with a private firm set her up to be fair judge, she said, and she cited a sexual assault case she lost as a prosecutor as evidence of her integrity in the face of likely defeat.

"I was never afraid of taking on the difficult cases if I believed that it was the right thing to do," she said.

Democratic senators lauded her resume and "historic" nomination throughout the hour-and-forty-five minute hearing.

Committee chair Nicholas Scutari, D-Union, said he initially believed she was too young, but he changed his mind after speaking with the nominee, her colleagues and adversaries.

"Your experience belies your age," he said. "I haven't found one person to say one thing negative about this nominee, and that is hard."

Pierre-Louis also said her personal history gave her a well of experience to draw upon.

Her seven-member family once lived in a two-bedroom Brooklyn apartment, she said, before moving to Irvington. English was not her first language, and she said her work ethic came from seeing her dad drive a New York City taxi and her mom move patients at a hospital. She later received financial aid for college from the state's Educational Opportunity Fund, which helps students from "educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds."

Pierre-Louis sidestepped questions about how she viewed certain cases or the role of the state constitution, saying it would be inappropriate to comment on issues she may rule on in the future. One lawmaker asked if she agreed with the analogy that a judge should only act like an umpire, calling balls or strikes and not advocating for one team.

“I think it simplifies the role of a judge,” she said about the comparison. “If you put ten umpires in a room and they look at the same close pitch, half might say it’s a ball, half might say it’s a strike.”

Republicans used part of the hearing to rail against past Supreme Court decisions and recent executive orders from Gov. Phil Murphy, echoing frequent conservative concerns that the court is too liberal and oversteps its authority.

After critiquing a series of rulings concerning affordable housing in Mount Laurel, state Sen. Gerald Cardinale, R-Bergen, even asked Pierre-Louis if she was a communist. She said she was not.

Cardinale’s colleague, state Sen. Michael Doherty, R-Warren, continually returned to an orange ribbon Pierre-Louis wore the day the governor announced her nomination.

Pierre-Louis said she believed the ribbon was only in honor of gun violence victims, since June 5 was National Gun Violence Awareness Day.

Doherty said the ribbon was a clear symbol for “Orange Ribbons for Gun Safety,” a Florida-based nonprofit advocating for “enhanced background checks,” raising the age for purchasing a gun and other “common-sense gun safety” laws.

Wearing the ribbon either showed bias for certain policies, Doherty said, or poor judgement for wearing a symbol without vetting it, and he lambasted her for not being “big” enough to apologize.

When asked for clarification about the ribbon’s intention, Murphy spokeswoman Alyana Alfaro pointed to an earlier statement by the governor saying orange was worn “in solidarity” with victims and survivors. Alfaro did not respond to questions about who proposed wearing the ribbon or if it was purposely tied to a specific group.

But Pierre-Louis ultimately won over the critics. Both Doherty and Cardinale voted “yes,” and Cardinale said she was “pretty close” to a perfect candidate.

Pierre-Louis was joined Monday by her husband, two young sons and other relatives. She would be only the third Black Supreme Court justice in New Jersey’s 244-year history.

She was nominated by Murphy to replace Justice Walter Timpone, who reaches the mandatory retirement age of 70 in November. Timpone and Pierre-Louis are both Democrats, meaning the court will likely continue to have three Democrats, three Republicans and one independent.

Pierre-Louis must serve seven years before lawmakers consider giving her lifetime tenure, at which point she could influence the court for decades.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Sophie Nieto-Munoz contributed to this report.