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local news

In memory of an ally

The county mourns the passing of one of its most dynamic and devoted public officials

by Irene K. Hislop

The gay, lesbian and bisexual community, and indeed all of Multnomah County, lost a powerful friend on Easter Sunday, April 11. Multnomah County Chairwoman Gladys McCoy died after a determined battle with a rare and aggressive form of thyroid cancer. She was 65 years old.

McCoy was the first African American woman to hold many of the government positions she held in a quarter-century of public service. She was also among the first public officials to speak out against the Oregon Citizens Alliance. McCoy will be remembered as a political trailblazer, a devoted mother, a role model, and a powerful advocate for justice and civil rights.

McCoy was raised in the South, where she grew up learning firsthand the horrors of oppression. She moved to Portland in 1949 to work for the YMCA, and she met her husband, state Sen. Bill McCoy, here. After going to graduate school in Boston, she returned to Portland and earned a master's degree in social work from Portland State University in 1970. That same year, she entered the political arena as a member of the Portland School Board. As usual, she was the first African American member.

Her interest in the school board was more than political. She and her husband had seven children. She was an involved mother, despite her busy career. McCoy found time for Little League, as well as a host of other community service projects, including the Mental Health Advocacy Board. McCoy was a teacher. In the broad sense, her life stands as a lesson in compassion and dedication. But she also taught sociology and social work for five years in various local colleges. She spent three years as director of social services for the Head Start program before winning public office.

McCoy went on to serve a second term on the school board before she became state ombudsman in 1975. Her duties in that office included counseling the governor on affirmative action issues. She was appointed by then-Gov. Robert Straub and served until 1978, when she was elected for the first time to the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. She then ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the Portland City Council in 1984.

That defeat was temporary. Two years later, she ran for chair of the Multnomah County Board of Commissions. *Just Out* endorsed her in that election. The voting public agreed; she won. Voters enthusiastically re-elected her to that position in 1990. Despite her illness, McCoy had planned to finish the four-year term.

In office, McCoy was fiercely dedicated to her beliefs. She fought bigotry on too many fronts to list. She will be remembered for her work with the Columbia Villa public housing project. McCoy had lived in the project, which at one point in the late 1980s was discussed regularly in news stories about gangs, violence and drug problems. McCoy made the project an issue for the county, and improved the quality of living for its residents. She was especially proud of her work there.

McCoy was instrumental in integrating Portland's public schools. As a school board member, she wouldn't settle for anything less than integration for all grade levels. When the Portland City Club finally agreed to admit women, McCoy was the second woman admitted.

Her pioneering work earned her a steady stream of awards. In 1974, she won a Woman of Achievement award. In 1980, McCoy was named Oregon Mother of the Year. She won two awards in 1987: National Association of Blacks in Criminal Justice Services' Community Service Award, and Oregon Assembly of Black Affairs' Political Development Award.

McCoy's many firsts included being the first woman president of the Association of Oregon Counties. She also served on the national board of the National Organization of Black Elected Officials.

"She was one of those people leaders," said state Rep. Margaret Carter, "who transcended the label of 'black leader,' working tirelessly for all the people of the state."

It was a teary-eyed Carter who called for a moment of silence after announcing her friend's death on the House floor. Carter worked on McCoy's first Portland School Board race.

Gov. Barbara Roberts didn't serve with McCoy on any of the various boards and committees each woman was part of, but they did meet often in their years of public service.

"If there's a word that sums Gladys up, it is public service," Roberts said. "Her whole career, not just her political career, but also her career prior to that, working in programs like Head Start and early education... was about public service."

McCoy's public was everyone. "She talked about her rainbow," recalled Don Clark, a former Multnomah County executive. "One of her major themes was that we needed to build up a community of diverse people — and that ought to be so in everything we do. She thought there was a strength that comes from diversity that you don't get when everyone looks the same."

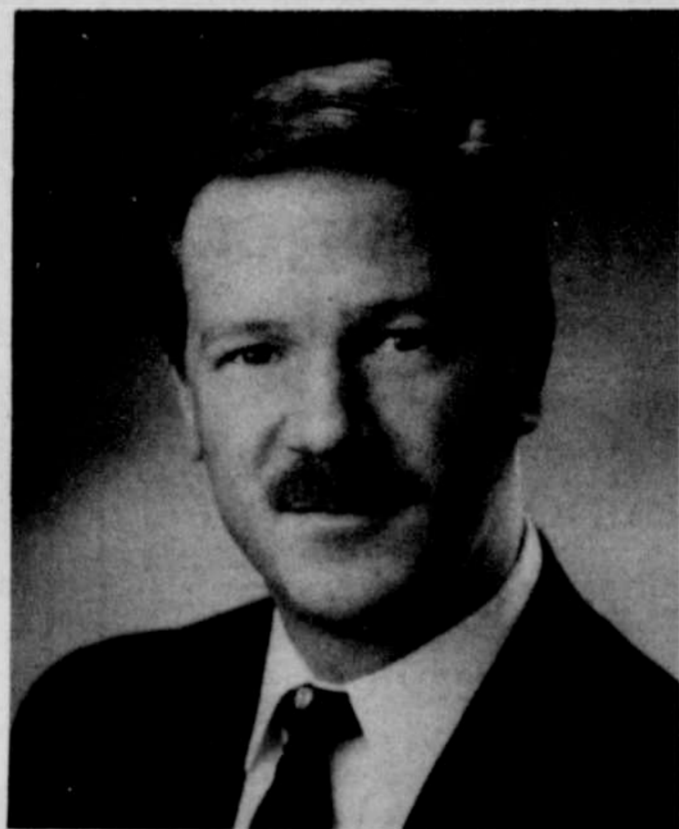
Nearly 1,000 people gathered on Thursday, April 15, at North Portland's Holy Cross Catholic Church to mourn McCoy's death. Approximately 700 family members, friends and admirers crowded the pews inside, and hundreds more filled the parish hall and the sidewalk outside. In a two-hour mass, the Rev. Cathal Brennan spoke of McCoy's legacy, and how she inspired others, especially younger women.

"Gladys herself was color-blind, but never people-blind," Brennan said.

McCoy led Oregon vast distances down the road to a community where respect replaces hate, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream comes true, and we are all judged by the content of our character. McCoy traveled past many obstacles, and she led the way for countless other people to follow. Perhaps the most fitting tribute Oregon can pay to Gladys McCoy is to continue that journey.



PHOTO BY EDALIND KEENE



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