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Marie Wilkinson: 1909-2010

Aurora civil rights leader Marie Wilkinson dies

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AURORA -- It's the end of an era.

People say that all the time. But the phrase was invented for people like Marie Wilkinson.

Known as the matriarch of Aurora, Wilkinson spent most of her 101 years giving back to the city she called home. Whether it was feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, convincing politicians to enact fair laws or fighting for equal rights for everyone, wherever there was a need, Wilkinson was there.

Wilkinson died at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at Alden of Waterford in Aurora, where she has lived for the past few years. She leaves behind a legacy few could match. She opened doors for thousands of people to walk through and left footprints in which generations of social activists have walked.

"She lived a long, very eventful and beautiful existence," said her daughter, Sheila Scott-Wilkinson. "I think she lived the way she died. She died with peace."

Wilkinson was born Marie LeBeau in New Orleans on May 6, 1909. She moved to Aurora in 1929 and married auto mechanic Charles Wilkinson three years later. Her charitable works started small -- she opened her home at 648 N. View St. to anyone who needed anything, and donors would drop off clothes and food for her to distribute.

In 1961, she started the St. Vincent DePaul Center on Sard Avenue with the help of St. Peter's Church. That was merely the first of dozens of organizations she founded or helped to organize. The list is massive and includes the Quad County Urban League, the city's Human Relations Commission (which she chaired for 40 years), and the food pantry and child development center that bear her name.

On a larger stage, Wilkinson was a strong crusader for civil rights. She worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and met Rosa Parks and Mamie Till-Mobley, mother of Emmett Till. In 2001, she received the Lumen Christi Award, the Catholic Church's highest honor for missionary work.

Inspiring others

But her home was Aurora, and the real story of Marie Wilkinson can be found in the countless people she helped, one by one. Whoever you were, whatever your story, Marie Wilkinson loved you and wanted to do what she could.

"There were so many individual stories," Scott-Wilkinson said. "People would always come up to me and say, 'Your mother sent my daughter to college,' or 'Your mother fed me when I was hungry.' She did more work in a lifetime than a lot of people do."

Her legacy lies in the organizations she founded, certainly, but also in the people she inspired through the years. Scott-Wilkinson is one of them -- she owns and operates Theatre of Hearts in Los Angeles, a non-profit that provides arts education to low-income and underprivileged children.

Lillian Perry lived just a couple of streets over from Wilkinson and met her more than 50 years ago. Wilkinson was instrumental in getting Perry's daughter accepted into Holy Angels School, despite the fact that Perry was not Catholic.

Perry has followed a similar path, beginning her own community organizations, but she says Wilkinson had a different style, one she learned a lot from. She says Wilkinson taught her to tone herself down, speak softly and still get results. Perry now works for state Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia.

"We have lost a worthy person who paved the way for so many," she said. "And I'm one of those many."

Clayton Muhammad, spokesman for the East Aurora School District, has known Wilkinson for most of his life and has been inspired by her example. He noted that Aurora has erected monuments to Wilkinson, including renaming part of View Street after her and building a bronze statue of her in front of the Aurora Public Library.

"She will live on forever through those monuments, but most of all she will live on through all of us," Muhammad said. "She opened so many doors for us."

Love to share

And there is Alderman Scheketa Hart-Burns. With Wilkinson's daughter in California, Hart-Burns was chosen to take care of her during the last few years, visiting her at Alden as often as she could. She has known the Wilkinsons for much of her life and was there when Charles died in 1995. Hart-Burns remembers the two of them together and how much love they had for one another.

"He loved her so much you could see it," she said. "He was so happy to say 'This is my wife,' and you could see the glow on her face as he talked about her."

Hart-Burns was one of the recipients of the first-ever Marie Wilkinson Spirit Awards last year (the others were her husband William, food pantry head Miriam Whall, special education teacher Susan Anderson and the Prisco family). Scott-Wilkinson said the awards were a good way to keep her mother's legacy alive and encourage people to respond to the needs of the community.

And they need that encouragement, said Hart-Burns. Wilkinson's passing leaves a void, one the younger generation must rise to fill, she said.

"We need more Marie Wilkinsons to pop up all over the city," she said. "Because she has given us so much, it's time for people to give back."

As for Wilkinson, her time of giving everything she had to give is over, and her time of rest has begun. Scott-Wilkinson said her mother died with a smile on her face, her earthly work completed.

"I miss her. It seemed like she would go on forever," she said. "She felt her work was done in the body that she had. I think now we can all pray to her and she can help us out down here."

Marie Wilkinson: 1909-2010 Timeline

1909: Marie LeBeau is born in New Orleans, La.

1922: She first comes to Aurora, visiting a friend of her mother.

1929: LeBeau moves to Aurora and meets Charles Wilkinson.

1932: Charles and Marie Wilkinson are married.

1950s: Wilkinson is refused entry to an Aurora restaurant. She files a complaint, which sparks her future activism.

1959: Wilkinson is named National Catholic Woman of the Year for her humanitarian efforts in Aurora.

1961: When the volume of donations outgrows her basement, Wilkinson helps start the St. Vincent DePaul Center on Sard Avenue in Aurora, and begins her Feed The Hungry campaign.

1964: At the urging of Wilkinson, Mayor Jay Hunter creates the Bi-Racial Commission, which will eventually become the Aurora Human Relations Commission.

1965: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. leads a march in Selma, Ala., and Wilkinson raises \$12,000 to cover food, lodging and bail expenses. King calls to thank her.

1968: Under Wilkinson's lead, the Human Relations Commission opposes a state law that allows discrimination in home sales. As a result, the state passes Illinois' first fair housing ordinance.

1970: The Marie Wilkinson Child Development Center opens on Gale Street.

1977: Wilkinson helps start the Aurora Area Urban League, which would later become the Quad County Urban League.

1994: Wilkinson helps start Community Celebration for Reconciliation, a two-week campaign against violence in Aurora.

1995: Charles Wilkinson dies after a long illness.

1998: View Street, where Wilkinson lived since 1929, is rechristened Honorary Marie Wilkinson Boulevard.

2001: Wilkinson receives the Catholic Church's highest honor for a missionary, the Lumen Christi Award. She is the first non-ordained person to receive the award.

2004: The Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry opens on Highland Avenue, a direct outgrowth of her Feed the Hungry Program which started in the 1960s.

2008: The city of Aurora unveils a statue of Marie Wilkinson for her 99th birthday. The bronze likeness sits outside the downtown Aurora Public Library.