

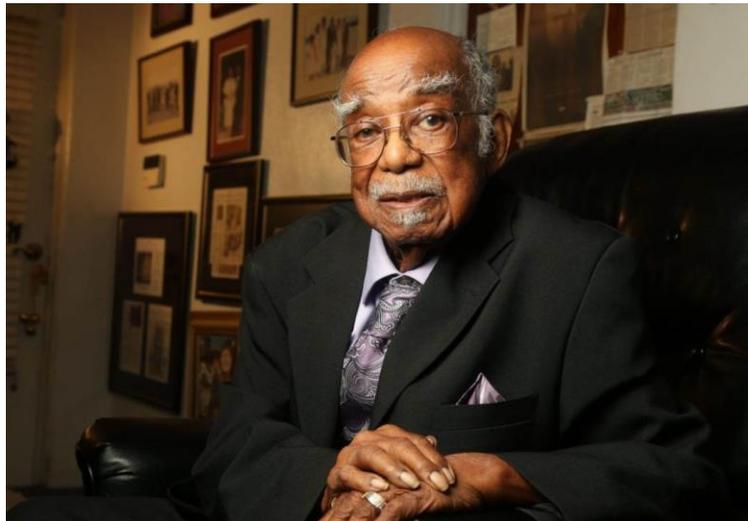


Press



Release

Community, civil rights activist Jimmy Huger dies at 101



Daytona Beach lost one of its greatest icons and links to the past Friday night.

Jimmy Huger — who had met three U.S. presidents, became one of the first black Marines during World War II, knew Martin Luther King Jr., and became the first black Daytona Beach city commissioner and Volusia County councilman — died a little after 9:30 p.m. Friday surrounded by family at Halifax Health Medical Center.

Time just caught up with the 101-year-old Huger, who was less than three months from turning 102, said his 37-year-old granddaughter, Sophia Huger.

"He literally passed of old age. No crazy disease," she said.

She said his health declined quickly over the past week. He had just made a trip with family to and from Atlanta to get out of the path of Hurricane Matthew, and said he didn't feel well when he returned to Daytona Beach.

He checked into the hospital Monday, and was able to talk to family who visited and called up until Thursday, Sophia Huger said.

"Everybody got the opportunity to say goodbye, and I love you," she said.

Sophia Huger said she realizes what an exceptional man her grandfather was.





"I just think he has left an incredible legacy for us here," she said. "He was a beaming example of what a great man is."

Despite all of his accomplishments, in an interview close to two years ago, Jimmy Huger said he didn't consider himself an exceptional man. He said he believed God designed his life and he just went through the motions.

"The Lord just blessed me," Huger said in the interview in his home, a modest one-story structure that over 50 years had become a museum of his accomplishments with his vast collection of framed certificates, plaques, trophies and photos covering nearly every square inch of wall space.

"A lot of this stuff I had no control over," Huger said. "It all went according to God's plan. He gave me an opportunity to change a lot and help a lot of people."

A guiding force in his life had been a sentence uttered by King, someone he counted as a fraternity brother and friend: "If I can help somebody as I pass along, if I can cheer somebody with a word or song, if I can show somebody he's traveling wrong, then my living will not be in vain."

His 100th birthday was celebrated with about 500 people at a cocktail party and dinner gala complete with live music at the Daytona 500 Club at Daytona International Speedway. The room was packed with Volusia County leaders past and present, and Huger was honored with both live and videotaped remarks of some of those leaders.

"I never thought I'd see this day," Huger said just before his age rolled into triple digits.

"God has left him on this earth for a reason only God knows," his son, 64-year-old Thomas Huger, said at the time. "He has served his Creator very well."

Huger came into the world Jan. 4, 1915. Born in Tampa, he and his brother were the sons of a Methodist minister who continually moved their family of four from town to town in Florida.

When Huger was about 15 years old, the family landed in Daytona Beach. It was a time when many homes in the city had no running water, some roads were unpaved and blacks were forced to live in an area between Nova Road and Ridgewood Avenue.

The era was marked by uncompromising segregation, when even the maternity wards at Halifax Hospital were segregated and Huger had two choices for high school: the all-black Campbell School and Bethune-Cookman College, which offered both high school and college courses.

His mother chose Bethune-Cookman, a private school that didn't have to settle for the outdated books and equipment that black public schools did, and it put him on a path neither he nor his family foresaw at the time. They never anticipated one of the buildings there would one day bear his name.

With his high school diploma in hand in 1933, Huger set out into the world with a dream that bears little





resemblance to what his life eventually became.

“I wanted to be an actor,” he said.

When he was still in high school, he read a magazine article about Rudolph Valentino and decided he wanted to be one of Hollywood's next great treasures.

“Valentino was always the best dressed and he always had pretty girls around him, so I decided that's how I wanted to be,” Huger said with a big smile.

He laughed at the memory, but said at the time he was completely serious. He dropped out of college at Bethune-Cookman after his first year and took a job at a Daytona beachside hotel to start making money while he chased after his thespian dreams.

Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder and president of the school that bears her name, caught wind of Huger ending his education and hunted him down at the hotel. He had finished his first day of work at the hotel, where he had just moved in, and he got a loud knock on his door as he was about to go to sleep.

“I said 'come on in, baby,' and Mary McLeod Bethune walked in,” Huger recalled. “I fell off the bed.”

Huger explained his father didn't make much money, and he wanted a different life for himself.

“She said, 'Huger, you're going back to school,’” he recalled. “A half-dozen people were standing around staring. It really was the most embarrassing situation of my life, but it turned out to be one of the most important factors of my life.”

Huger didn't expect much to change for blacks in his lifetime, but Bethune did, and she told Huger she wanted to prepare him for opportunities that would slip out of his hands without the foundation of a solid education.

She helped him get degrees at Bethune-Cookman, West Virginia State University and the University of Michigan, as well as jobs in Washington, D.C. at the Department of Defense and eventually back at Bethune-Cookman.

“You couldn't fight her,” Huger said. “I wasn't afraid of her. I respected her.”

More than 80 years later, Huger said he didn't know why, but “I was one of the people she picked to make it.”

Huger saw a direct line between the opportunities Bethune guided him through and him becoming the first elected black local government official in Volusia County in 1965. He overcame the at-large post system designed to keep blacks out of office and took a seat on the Daytona Beach City Commission.

In 1973, he became the first black Volusia County councilman and went on to become vice chairman and chairman of that body.

During his five years on the County Council, he was also Daytona Beach's community development director and his boss was former City Manager Howard Tipton.





Huger “was instrumental in getting the redevelopment program in Daytona Beach,” said Tipton, who was Daytona's manager from 1978 until 1994. “The Council had to approve it.”

Huger also helped get the Ocean Center in its current beachside location, helping to fight the push from some to instead locate the building near the county jail west of Daytona Beach, Tipton said.

“It takes guys like Jimmy to get things done,” Tipton said. “He's the kind of guy who made a difference every day of his life.”

Daytona Beach Mayor Derrick Henry said Huger is “one of the most dynamic leaders we've had” and “just legendary.”

“I don't have an adequate vocabulary to describe all he has done and what he has meant to us,” Henry said.

P.T. “Bud” Fleuchaus, a retired dentist who was on the County Council with Huger, said Huger did key things such as chairing the group that wrote the county charter.

“He was respected,” Fleuchaus said. “He was a good leader. He was a fine gentleman.”

Former County Chair Frank Bruno said Huger's terms on the County Council came at a time when big things were happening and top-notch leadership was essential. Huger “was a stabilizing force,” Bruno said.

“He was a mentor of mine for many, many years,” said Bruno, who served on the County Council from 1982 to 1988 and again from 1998 to the end of 2012. “We met on a regular basis. He was a fabulous man to speak to.”

Huger worked in state-level politics to help get Jimmy Carter elected president in 1976, and a month after election day Huger was considered for a job in Carter's administration, but the position never materialized.

After suffering racism in his younger years, Huger became beloved and respected by both black and white leaders of Volusia County.

“He was important not only for what he did for the black community, but for bridging the gap between blacks and whites,” said Daytona State College History Professor Leonard Lempel, who has focused most of his research and writings on Daytona's race relations and the black community. “He made whites see the importance of interracial cooperation.”

While Huger racked up a few firsts for blacks in politics, he failed to break the color barrier at the University of Florida when he tried to enroll there. But he won several other integration battles.

Huger was an avid golfer who showed up one afternoon with his clubs at the city's golf course, which didn't allow blacks until after 5 p.m. Huger promised he'd sue if anyone tried to remove him that day about 45 years ago, and he was allowed to play. Tipton said “unfortunately the city kind of ran it like a white man's organization.”





One of his biggest victories was being among the first black men allowed to enlist in the Marine Corps, and he ran with the opportunity and became a sergeant major.

One day when he was in his dress uniform, a white military policeman who was a private first class detained him for impersonating an officer.

Once Huger was able to prove he had earned all six stripes on his uniform, he made his displeasure known to the young soldier.

Cynthia Slater, who's been Daytona's NAACP president since 2001, said Huger has been an invaluable counselor to her. She said one of the things she learned from him is “you don't always have to be on the defensive.”

“I admire him for his tenacity, but he wasn't an agitator,” Slater said. “He would listen to everybody. He was able to talk and bring the community together when there was a lot of divisiveness.”

“Jimmy is one of a kind,” said former Daytona Beach Mayor Larry Kelly, who has known Huger since the late 1960s. “I've met five U.S. presidents, but I've got to say he's one of the most prestigious people I've ever known. Everything he's done has been outstanding. He's just one great American. He's absolutely an icon you look up to.”

Thomas Huger said it's “heartwarming” every time someone comes up to him and tells him how his father made a major difference in their life.

“He has touched a lot of people, and he's made a lot of friends along the way. I think that's what kept him going,” the younger Huger said.

In the 2015 interview, Huger said he wasn't sure how he made it to 100. His parents died around age 80, and he never really worried about diet and exercise. He said he still enjoyed a glass of white Zinfandel wine or champagne.

Sophia Huger said he never had an acutely serious health problem. But he did grow frail, and he leaned hard on the walker he used to get around.

His said his life was always full, including the trips he and his wife took to just about every place on the planet.

He lost his wife of 67 years, Phannye, about eight years ago and missed her. When asked during the interview what he wanted for Christmas, a wistful expression washed over his face and he pointed to a portrait of Phannye on his living room wall.

Despite all his accomplishments, he said what he valued most were his three sons, 10 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Their pictures were everywhere in his home, and he got visits from many of them every week.

“Everyone thinks of him as a great leader, but he's just my granddad,” said Sophia Huger, who remembers





little things, like how he used to make special hot dogs for the grandkids.

“My family is the most remarkable part of my life,” Huger said.

If he could start over and go back to 1915, he said he would do most everything the same.

“It's been a crazy life, but swingin', ” he said. “I've had a terrific life. This is what you call a blessed life.”

