

Press



Release

TAPS: (Announcement) the passing of a great pioneer)

Mr. Willie Earl Clark III

Lynchburg civil rights warrior dies at 84

Credit: Kim Raff/The News & Advance
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W.E. Clark III, photographed in his home in Lynchburg, was one of a group of about 20,000 Marines trained at Montford Point, at Camp Lejune, who were recently recognized as the initial surge of African-American Marines who broke a major military color barrier.

As one old civil rights warrior to another, Garnell Stamps paid the late William E. Clark his highest compliment on Tuesday. "He (Clark) never retired from the movement," Stamps said. "One of the few."

Clark died Friday from the effects of a stroke. Yet right up until the end — which came a day before his 85th birthday and just prior to a trip to Washington D.C. to receive a Congressional Gold Medal — the former Dunbar High School teacher and NAACP activist remained engaged in his community.

To Clark, the term "civil rights" was all-inclusive, referring not just to racial issues, but any perceived societal inequity or government injustice.

"He was always looking out for the least of us," said Lynchburg labor activist Walter Fore, another longtime friend. Clark never held political office, preferring to affect change from outside or as a member of a community board. "When he joined something," Stamps said, "he always took it seriously. It wasn't just so he could drop names." In his retirement years, Clark frequently showed up at lectures, public hearings and City Council meetings.

"Sometimes he would sit through a public meeting and never say a word, but he was listening," Fore said. "Then he'd talk to people privately about what he thought." At other times, however, Clark didn't mind expressing an opinion for all to hear. "One of the things I appreciated most about him was his ability to speak truth to power," said Leslie King, a community liaison assistant to Lynchburg's city manager. "Right from the beginning, he was an integral part of the city's Dialogue on Racism."

Walter Fore's much-earlier first contact with Clark was something less than positive.

"I had him for science," Fore recalled of his time at Dunbar, "and he failed me. That led to my joining the Marine Corps, which was the best thing that ever happened to me. We didn't get reacquainted until about 35 years after that." Clark also was a Marine, one of those who broke a military color barrier by training at Montford Point, N.C.— the first African-American Marine camp — just after World War II.

Earlier this year, Congress voted to award the Montford Point Marines a collective Congressional Gold Medal, in a ceremony scheduled for later this month.

"Willie had bought a new suit for that presentation," Fore said. The issues that energized Clark ranged from suspension policies in public schools to substandard housing in inner-city neighborhoods to Lynchburg's annexation of Tyreanna — the Campbell County community in which Clark lived — in 1976. "They put the landfill in out there," recalled Fore, "and that didn't make him happy."

In recent years, Clark focused much of his energy on the Dialogue on Racism. Along with Fore and others, he traveled around Central Virginia trying to mediate racially charged disputes between employers and employees. "One of his biggest disappointments," Fore said, "was that he didn't think many of the young people in Lynchburg appreciated what his generation did with civil rights."

Yet Clark remained interested in inter-generational contact, tutoring struggling students and sometimes even helping them financially.

"He was a man who spoke his mind," said Stamps, "and he was very much respected. The city is going to miss him." Clark is survived by his wife, Geraldine, and two grown children. A memorial service is set for 11 a.m. Monday at Diamond Hill Baptist Church on Grace Street. Clark's family will receive visitors from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday at Pleasant Valley Baptist Church on Pleasant Valley Road. Carl B. Hutcherson Funeral Home is handling arrangements.
