



Mrs. Lyda Constance Merrick Watts

October 17, 1920 - February 25, 2015

Lyda Constance Merrick Watts was born October 17, 1920 in Durham, North Carolina. She was the second daughter of Lyda Vivian Moore Merrick and Edward Richard Merrick, and the granddaughter of Dr. & Mrs. Aaron McDuffie Moore (Sarah McCotta Dancy) and Mr. & Mrs. John Merrick (Martha Hunter). Her grandfather, Dr. Aaron M. Moore, founded Lincoln Hospital, where she was born, and he was Durham's first black physician. Constance was educated in Durham's public-school system from first through ninth grade. She then attended Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, NC through high school. In 1941 she earned a BA in Economics from Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama and studied afterwards at Columbia University graduate school. Her studies in New York were interrupted by the attack upon Pearl Harbor which drew the USA into WWII. Constance wanted to return to Columbia for her second year, but her father, like many people, "feared they would drop a bomb on New York next" and did not want his baby girl at risk. Returning home to Durham in '42, she worked as a loan clerk for North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company while actively participating in several community service organizations. She twice served as president of the Durham Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, a sorority chapter founded by her accomplished and vivacious older sister, Vivian Merrick Sansom.

In 1945 Constance wed Dr. Charles Dewitt Watts of Atlanta, Georgia. The happy couple first met on the occasion of Charles' graduation from Morehouse College in Atlanta. Shortly thereafter he traveled to Durham to serve as best man for his dear friend, Joseph Sansom, who was marrying Constance's sister, Vivian. In the years to come, Charles often reminisced, "I couldn't take my eyes off Constance at that wedding." Constance was a popular young woman - after all she had been "Miss Talladega" two years in a row. But Charles Watts was a handsome, brilliant and extremely persistent, young doctor and soon stood at the altar once more. This time with his own beautiful bride. What a powerful marriage and a lasting love that would be!

From their union four children were born: C. Eileen Watts Welch, Deborah Chase Watts Hill, Charles Dewitt Watts Jr. and Winifred Watts Hemphill. For a while, of course they were just Eileen, Debbie, Chuck and Wini; four healthy, smart, mischievous, earnest children eager to live up to their parents' shining example. While raising her four children,

Constance also provided significant management and social support for Dr. Watts' growing medical and surgical practice. When their aging mothers, Ida Hawes Watts and Lyda Moore Merrick, became frail, Constance cared for the women in her home. Throughout her life, Constance demonstrated a deep concern for humanity in general and an undying compassion for family, family life and for those in her community. Known for her strong, yet gentle, leadership skills, her role as charter member, president or even founder served her well as she made a difference in so many lives. Her elegance, warmth, poise and matchless charm have been legendary to all those who have spent time in her presence. She lifted any room she entered to a higher standard just by being her remarkable self. Constance was a lady in the truest sense of the word.

Constance Watts' community organizational affiliations were many and meaningful. For approximately 10 years, surrounding 1960, she facilitated distribution of the Girl Scout Council's cookies to the Hayti community.

In the mid-1970s through 1990 African-Americans in Durham were beginning to be elected to public office. Constance was the campaign treasurer for each of the years when the first African-American women were elected to the board of the Durham County Commissioners and the Durham Board of Education. Elna Spaulding served for 10 years as a Durham County Commissioner and Josephine Dobbs Clement 10 years on the Durham Board of Education and five years as Durham County Commissioner.

Like her maternal grandfather before her, she believed in the importance of making books available for all citizens. Constance served as co-chair of the Durham County Library Centennial Celebration, as a board member of the Stanford L. Warren Branch Library and treasurer of the Durham Colored Library, Inc.

Key among her other volunteer endeavors were being a charter member of the Durham Chapter of the Links, Incorporated, a founding member of the Tuesday Morning Study Group and a docent of the Duke Art Museum, as well as on the board of the North Carolina Central University Art Museum. She also gave significant portions of her time to mentoring and tutoring students at W.G. Pearson Elementary School.

Her church membership with St. Joseph's AME Church included, among other activities, singing in the senior choir and participating in the Ladies Aid Society. When the old St. Joseph's AME Church was slated to be demolished by Durham's "Urban Renewal" during the mid-1970s, she volunteered to save the church. Her parents' and grandparents' homes had been destroyed so she was determined to protect the church structure. The old church's demolition was averted and ultimately revived to a state-of-the-art cultural enrichment and arts educational facility dedicated to the preservation of Hayti's heritage. Because of her hard work with that Hayti committee, the church was designated a National Historic Landmark. To this day the Hayti Heritage Center serves as a viable venue for concerts and art events featuring cultural diversity.

Constance also served several terms as a trustee for Mutual Community Savings Bank.

Other boards graced by her participation included Durham and Community Healthcare Foundation, Auxiliary of the Durham County Medical Society, United Way of Durham and Auxiliary of the Durham Academy of Medicine, Dentistry and Pharmacy. By her actions, Constance Watts was in both word and deed a remarkable woman, citizen and human being.

When interviewed by The Herald-Sun in 1989 on the subject of family, Constance talked about growing up in the Hayti community of Durham. At the end of the newspaper article she expressed her personal views on how the integration in the 60s changed her outlook of Durham. She remarked, "Before, I thought of myself as a citizen of Hayti. Now I feel I'm a citizen of Durham. It is definitely better. There are more opportunities now." Her optimism and community spirit shined through every word, when, as we all know, change never comes easy. Yet, Constance was always eager to learn something new and embrace the next adventure with her own sweet brand of grace.

In death she is joining her husband of 59 years, Dr. Charles DeWitt Watts, Sr., who passed in 2004; her second daughter, Deborah Chase Watts Hill, who passed in 1993; and her loving and noble ancestors. She is survived by her sister, Vivian McCotta Merrick Sansom of Raleigh, NC who is 97 years old; three children, C. Eileen Watts Welch (Jim), Charles D. Watts, Jr. (Janis Ernst) and Winifred Watts Hemphill (Dana); nine grandchildren, three great-grandchildren and a host of nieces, nephews, cousins and friends who she loved very much.

The family has requested in lieu of flowers, donations in her memory be made to the Durham Colored Library, Inc., founded by her maternal grandfather in 1913, and mailed to P.O. Box 2736, Durham NC 27715-2736. For more information and donations via the Internet, the web site is www.DurhamCL.com. Durham Colored Library, Inc. (DCL, Inc.) is an organization dedicated to lifting up stories about African-Americans, both current and historical, to help create a more comprehensive picture of the American experience. The organization currently manages two writing projects, Merrick/Washington Magazine for the Blind and the Aaron McDuffie Moore biography project. Condolences to the family can be sent in care of C. Eileen Watts Welch, 2740 Montgomery Street, Durham, NC 27705.

Services are scheduled for Friday, March 6, 2015 at St Joseph's AME Church on Fayetteville Road – the Viewing/Wake will begin at 4:30 PM and funeral services will begin at 7:00 PM. The private interment is scheduled for Saturday, March 7th at 1:00 PM.

Events

MAR **Visitation** 04:30PM

6

St. Joseph AME Church

2521 Fayetteville St, Durham, NC, US, 27707

MAR **Service** 07:00PM

6

St. Joseph AME Church

2521 Fayetteville St, Durham, NC, US, 27707

Comments



“ Eileen, I am so deeply sorry to hear of the passing of your mother, Mrs. Lyda Watts. She was always such a sweet person. During this transition, know that God will give you all the strength and peace that you need. Depend on Him. And to the family, many blessings of encouragement and love and remember how much Mrs. Lyda will be remembered by all.
Patricia Brunson White

Patricia White - March 08, 2015 at 07:01 AM



“ Dear Watts Family,

May your hearts soon be filled with wonderful memories of joyful times together as you celebrate a life well lived.

Sincerely, Carol Barrett Small

Carol Small - March 06, 2015 at 08:11 PM



“ When I was new to Durham I joined the YWCA and was assigned to work on the program committee with Connie Watts. What a wonderful introduction to the strong and committed women of Durham! Her grace and wisdom guided many of our most successful endeavors, and she has been a lifelong (though unattainable) model for me. She demonstrated that the quiet way is often the best way. Seldom the first to speak but often the last, her wisdom was a steadying principle for many of us. Sadly, Durham's YWCA no longer exists, but for many years it was a leader in racial integration and women's empowerment and Connie's leadership was a major force in the good that it did. Her spirit is and will be much missed.
Amanda Smith

Amanda Smith - March 06, 2015 at 04:44 PM



“ Thank you Amanda. I appreciate you sharing this information. She was much more involved in various organizations than I understood until I crafted the Obit. Do you have dates (the years) of the YWCA work? I'd love to know more.

Eileen Watts Welch - March 26, 2015 at 10:40 AM



“ Michael & Nellie Jones lit a candle in memory of Mrs. Lyda Constance Merrick Watts



Michael & Nellie Jones - March 06, 2015 at 10:05 AM



“ Chuckie and family,

Our collective hearts are heavy with sympathy, condolences are with you

Mrs. Betty D Rivers and family

Miriam R Giles - March 06, 2015 at 08:49 AM



“ Wini, So sorry to hear about the passing of your mother. Praying for you and your family during this time. May the God of Comfort and Peace hold you and yours in the palms of his hands during this time.

Audrey Mangum-Long

Audrey Long - March 05, 2015 at 09:13 AM



“ Chuck & Family,

I am so sorry to hear of your loss. Your mother was a great woman. Please let me know if there is anything I can do.

Sheryl W. Richardson

Sheryl W. Richardson - March 04, 2015 at 12:43 PM



“ The work of Aunt Constance speaks for her.
A role model and mentor.

Rest in Peace,

Joseph M. Sansom
"Littlle Joe"

Joseph M. Sansom - March 03, 2015 at 06:32 PM



“ My special memory of Mrs. Watts involves a meeting I had with her and a fellow library board member (who happened to be white) in the mid 1990's regarding bringing the first public internet access point to a public library branch in McDougal Terrace. There was a lot of concern that a digital divide was being created and we needed to do all that we could to bridge that divide. Mrs. Watts was very supportive, but her fellow board member was not and said the library had other plans for public access points. Well, we at GTE and others, led by Erroll Reese and Rodney Rogers, established a computer lab and public internet access point at the McDougal Terrace public library branch - Durham's first public internet access point. I was very impressed with Mrs. Watts - her intelligence, her heart, grasp of community needs and her graceful nature. A very special lady, who helped make Durham the special community it is today. Durham is very fortunate to have had such a special citizen - and I'd like to thank her family for sharing her with us.
Steve Toler

Steve Toler - March 02, 2015 at 08:11 AM



“ Hello Steve, It is nice to hear first hand comments about Mom's involvement. Thank you for sharing. I will place this in our memory notebook so that future generations of our family will have access to such nice nuggets. Eileen Watts Welch - cewwelch@gmail.com

Eileen - March 26, 2015 at 10:46 AM