

□ Maya Angelou, the Nation's wise woman

Written by Jesse J. Holland, Associated Press
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BlackPressUSA - Maya Angelou walked into a meeting of civil rights leaders discussing affirmative action back in the 1990s, looked around, and put them all in their place with a single, astute observation.

"She came into the room," recalled Al Sharpton, "and she said: 'The first problem is you don't have women in here of equal status. We need to correct you before you can correct the country.'"

Angelou, who died Wednesday at 86, made an impact on American culture that transcended her soaring poetry and searing memoirs. She was the nation's wise woman, a poet to presidents, an unapologetic conscience who became such a touchstone that grief over her loss poured from political leaders, celebrities and ordinary people in generous doses.

"Above all, she was a storyteller – and her greatest stories were true," President Barack Obama said.

Never hesitant to speak her mind, Angelou passionately defended the rights of women, young people and the ignored. She effortlessly traversed the worlds of literature and activism, becoming a confidante to the original civil rights leaders, their successors and the current generation.

"I've seen many things, I've learned many things," Angelou told The Associated Press in 2013. "I've certainly been exposed to many things and I've learned something: I owe it to you to tell you."

Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League, remembered the "incredibly powerful experience" of being invited to Angelou's home. They sat at her kitchen table for hours, Morial said, as Angelou told stories and talked about life, art, culture and humankind.

"With equal parts majesty and humility, she held court — and I listened intently, absorbing every word and meaning that she had to impart," Morial said.

A former singer and dancer — as well as once being the first black streetcar conductor in San

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Francisco — she also put her imprint on the new world of celebrity, mentoring Oprah Winfrey, instructing Alicia Keys in "lining out," a call-and-response form of singing popular in Southern black churches, acting in a television sketch with Richard Pryor and inspiring singers, authors and actors of all races and genders.

Angelou was a "phenomenal woman of insight, eloquence and artistry who gave voice to the rawness and loftiness of our history and our humanity," said Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., the nation's first female House speaker.

Angelou's talents and platforms were boundless: poetry, books, movies, the spoken word, television, a weekly SiriusXM satellite radio show and even Twitter and Facebook. She collected accolades from all portions of society: a Tony Award in 1973 for her appearance in the play "Look Away"; three Grammys for her spoken-word albums; an honorary National Book Award for her contributions to the literary community; a National Medal of Arts; and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor.

Whether talking about the scourge of discrimination or the evil of sexism, "she has much to teach this generation and generations unborn about what it means to be an authentic person, and the power of the genuine," the Rev. Jesse Jackson said.

Before becoming a famed author, Angelou worked as a coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and lived for years in Egypt and Ghana, where she met Nelson Mandela, who became a longtime friend, and Malcolm X, to whom she remained close until his assassination in 1965.

Three years later, she was helping Martin Luther King Jr. organize the Poor People's March in Memphis, Tennessee. King was shot and killed there, on Angelou's 40th birthday.

"Every year, on that day, Coretta and I would send each other flowers," Angelou said of King's widow, Coretta Scott King, who died in 2006.

Women sympathized and empathized with Angelou's hardscrabble life. Born poor and black, she was a childhood victim of rape, shamed into silence. She was a young single mother who had to work at strip clubs for a living. She took all of that and turned it into "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," one of the most widely read memoirs of the past few decades.

"Her gifts were born out of pain," said Patricia Rosier, president of the National Bar Association. "This allowed those who came before us and those after us to rise. She was not afraid to fiercely explore her self-identity so that we, too, could fully be who we are. "

The mother to a son, Angelou mentored many "daughters," some through her work, others personally like Winfrey, who said Angelou "moved through the world with unshakeable calm, confidence and a fierce grace."

And just like a mom, Angelou took the designers of the national memorial in King's honor to task for inscribing it with a paraphrased version of King's famous "drum major" quote. Doing so,

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Angelou said, made King sound like an "arrogant twit."

Two years later, workers sandblasted the quote away. Angelou declined credit for the change.

"The artists — the sculptor and the architect — had the right to put on their work what they wanted to place," Angelou said in 2012. "I am a friend of Martin Luther King and a mentee and so I had the right to say what I thought. That's all."

- See more at: http://www.blackpressusa.com/2014/05/maya-angelou-the-nations-wise-woman/?utm_source=NNPA+Attendees&utm_campaign=4662b7c92d-BPUSA_Digest_5_84_17_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8eef023665-4662b7c92d-131454901#sthash.KagTdYxx.dpbs