

Katie McWatt: principled civic leadership

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On Monday, April 26th, the Twin Cities is celebrating the life of Katie McWatt, noted advocate for civil and human rights, community empowerment and development, a meaningful education system and a just legal system. McWatt, a lifelong resident of Minnesota, died Monday after an extended illness.

Services for Katie McWatt are, 9:30-10:30 am Monday, April 26 at St. Peter Claver Church, 1060 West Central, St. Paul. Visitation Service begins at 10:30 am. McWatt's Community Celebration follow, 2-5 pm, at Wilder Foundation, 451 Lexington Pkwy, North, St. Paul.

McWatt was a long-time member of the Saint Paul NAACP, serving as its First Vice President for more than a decade. She leaves a legacy of activism and influence that is impossible to measure, said Nick Khaliq, President of the St. Paul Chapter, NAACP.

“Our thoughts and prayers are with her husband of 55+ years, Arthur McWatt, and her family,” he said.

Katie McWatt started work as a student advisor with the Minnesota Employment Service Youth Opportunity Center. From there, she spent 18 years working at the Saint Paul Urban League as director of Community Services. She spent the last 18 years of her professional career as coordinator of the St. Paul Central High School Minority Program. She retired in 2000.

Katie McWatt’s advocacy work resulted in the development of St. Phillip’s Gardens affordable housing community. This undertaking revealed how few African Americans worked in the construction field. She was arrested while demonstrating with other leaders for a change in Saint Paul building trades hiring practices. “Eventually, the construction and building trades union leadership agreed to open up positions to Black men, Khaliq said.” McWatt also organized efforts to change the state prison system and collaborated with the Brotherhood of

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African American Culture at Stillwater prison to hold Black history programs. These initiatives motivated her to run for a seat on the Saint Paul City Council in 1964. She became the first African American to win a city-wide primary, setting a precedent for other Blacks to successfully pursue public office, Khaliq said.