

Marion Barry remembered for seeking equality, justice and dignity for all

By Katie Fretland, The Memphis Commercial Appeal, December 13, 2014

Kimberley Carter Byrd stood in front of guests at Metropolitan Baptist Church near candles glowing in honor of her cousin, Marion Barry. She read part of the Declaration of Independence aloud.

“My cousin spent the major part of his life fighting for what was supposed to be self-evident,” she said. “He spent his life fighting for freedom and found that freedom is not free and for which a high price had to be paid.”

Family, friends and dignitaries remembered Barry, the former District of Columbia mayor and civil rights movement veteran, with stories, music and poetry on Saturday at a service in Memphis. Classmates from Booker T. Washington High School and comrades from civil rights actions were present. Former Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton, Circuit Court Judge D’Army Bailey and LeMoyne-Owen College President Johnnie B. Watson were among the speakers. Barry died Nov. 23 at age 78.

He was born in Itta Bena, Mississippi, and moved to Memphis as a child. He attended Douglass Elementary School, Florida Elementary School, Booker T. Washington and graduated from LeMoyne-Owen College.

He was remembered for speaking out about racism and organizing a sit-in at the Memphis Public Library on Front Street. Barry organized a chapter of the NAACP at Fisk University and was the first chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He protested and worked to register people to vote across the South.

Watson remembered how Barry encouraged him to join the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity and that he emphasized the importance of high academic credentials. Watson said he never saw Barry study, and that the man was naturally smart. He thanked Barry for his contributions to Memphis, the country and the world.

“For that, I say thank you, thank you, thank you, Marion Barry,” Watson said.

Herenton said he and Barry grew up 10 blocks apart in South Memphis. He said Barry was a “unique and extraordinarily strong” person who sought equality, justice and dignity for all.

“Humankind was better because Marion Barry lived,” Herenton said, adding that when Barry got “knocked down,” he always got back up.

In Washington, Barry was a city councilman and longtime mayor. He was sentenced to six months in prison in 1990 on a drug possession conviction but he was re-elected for his fourth term as mayor in 1994.

“Strong men have weaknesses,” Herenton said. “My weaknesses may not be yours. Your weaknesses may not be mine. But we all have weaknesses.”

Bailey described him as a person conditioned on “the battlefield for freedom,” who was extraordinarily dedicated to making change.

A program for the service printed with gold lettering describes him as “always fighting for the people.”

His cousin, Byrd, who was a student in Washington when he was mayor, said he had a reputation as “a champion of the young, the aged and the poor.”

“The greatest legacy a man can leave behind is that he made the world a better place when he left than it was when he came,” she said.

“It is these kinds of selfless acts of which legends are made. He fought until the end.”