

Local Obituaries AUGUST 20, 2015

State's first black PTA president, child advocate, dies at 90



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When a \$12 million school bearing her name was dedicated in 2001, Eugenia B. Thomas told a cafeteria full of children there would be a time when the students wouldn't know who she was.

"They may say the school was named after some little old lady who did something," she said at the time.

But Thomas, who was the first black president of the Florida Parent Teacher Association and who made sure she was at the school at the beginning of each year, is not a person people forget, said her son John C. Thomas.

"She was a pretty unforgettable person in a lot of ways," he said. "My mother was an extremely unique individual with many talents."

Eugenia Thomas, wife of the late Lawson E. Thomas, one of the South's first black judges since Reconstruction and Dade's first black judge, died Monday after a long battle with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. She was 90.

"Eugenia was an icon in this community and a mentor to me, especially on equality and social justice," Eduardo J. Padrón, the president of Miami Dade College, said in an email. "She leaves a tremendous legacy not only in education but in legal services. There have been many days I'd think of her and how she'd address a difficult issue. She will be missed but never forgotten."

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, on Nov. 24, 1924, Thomas moved to Miami with her family when she was 5, her son said. Her son said that the Depression "hit her family hard," and her mother gave Eugenia and her two siblings up for adoption.

A deacon at St. John Institutional Baptist Church in Overtown took her and "raised her in the church."

Eugenia Thomas graduated first in her class at Booker T. Washington High School in 1940 and landed a job right out of high school working for one of two black lawyers in Miami, Lawson E. Thomas.

She then attended what is now called Florida Memorial University and studied mathematics. She was part of the university's first graduating class in 1945.

During her summers, she continued to work for Thomas. In 1953, she married Thomas, who was 26 years her senior. Together they had a daughter and son. Lawson Thomas died in 1989 at age 91.

Over the years, Eugenia Thomas racked up thousands of volunteer hours, lending her help to the PTA, the Children's Home Society, United Way and the Black Archives History and Research Foundation of South Florida, among other local organizations. She continued to work as a legal assistant, but always found time to help others, her son said.

"She really, really cared about all children," he said.

Besides having a school named after her — the Eugenia B. Thomas K-8 Center at 5950 NW 114th Ave. in Doral — she was named to Miami's Centennial Women's Hall of Fame in 1996. And she was selected as the state's first African-American woman president of the Florida Parent Teacher Association from 1988-1990.

In a recent nomination application for the Florida Women's Hall of Fame, Mayra Barreira, the former principal of Eugenia B. Thomas K-8 Center, said Eugenia Thomas' entire life has been "characterized by service and leadership."

"It was the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) that really sparked Eugenia's enthusiasm for becoming a child advocate," Barreira wrote. "It was the notion that she could do good for so many children that made the work heartfelt and meaningful."

For David Lawrence Jr., a child advocate and former publisher of the Miami Herald, Eugenia Thomas and her husband "quickly come to mind," when he thinks of the "most deserving to be remembered in Miami's history."

"She was the soul of decency and a speaking-up spirit," he said.

In addition to her son, Thomas is survived by her daughter Sharmayne Thomas and seven grandchildren.

Services will be held at 10 a.m. Saturday at St. Paul AME Church, 1866 NW 51st Ter., Miami.

Miami Herald reporter Howard Cohen contributed to this report.



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