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OBITUARY

Jean W. Toomer, first director of Howard's Office of Human Rights

By Frederick N. Rasmussen

Jean W. Toomer, a human rights and peace activist who served as the first director of the Howard County Office of Human Rights, died March 10 in her sleep at the Vi at Aventura retirement community in Aventura, Florida, where she had lived since moving from Columbia in 2015.

She was 93.

"Jean was a very strong advocate of human rights for everyone. She had a great deal of dignity and everything she did, she did with dignity," said Liz Bobo, who served as Howard County executive from 1986 to 1990 and later in the Maryland House of Delegates.

"She was always calm and strong and exuded dignity," Ms. Bobo said. "She had very strong opinions on human rights and treated all with respect, even those who had opposing views. No matter what, she was kind and positive, which is a great lesson for people."

The former Jean Elizabeth Warrick, daughter of John Harrison Warrick, owner of a brick masonry business, and his wife, Esther Snowden Warrick, a Savannah public schools principal, was born and raised in Savannah, Georgia.

She was a graduate and class valedictorian of Alice Freeman Palmer Memorial Institute, a boarding school in Sedalia, North Carolina, and later earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in government and political science from Howard University in Washington, where she was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

While at Howard, she met and fell in love with a fellow student, Clarence Douglass Toomer, whom she married in 1950. They settled in Washington, where her husband began a 35-year career at the National Security Agency, rising to become a senior cryptologist.

Because of her husband's work, the couple lived in Herzogenaurach, Germany, from 1960 to 1964, where they were often the only family of color, family members said.

Mr. Toomer also sold real estate, and in 1968 the couple built a home in Columbia and moved there to the Longfellow neighborhood with their five children.

From 1969 through the 1990s, Ms. Toomer was a visible Howard County activist focused on civil and human rights and issues facing African Americans and families. She also worked tirelessly to fulfill the vision and legacy of James W. Rouse, the

driving force behind the concept and building of Columbia.

Ms. Toomer was director of the city's community services for the Columbia Association and served as president of the Family Life Center, where she implemented before- and after-school programs for children of working parents, in addition to providing services for older adults and developing a program for low-income residents to gain membership in the Columbia Association.

In 1989, she took \$5,000 of her own money and established Community Building in Howard County, a nonprofit human rights organization that addressed concerns about ethnic and cultural

diversity, and she was the founder in 1993 of the Mediation and Conflict Resolution Center at Howard Community College.

"When I became county executive, Jean asked if I'd create a separate department that reported to the county executive, and we established the Howard County Office of Human Rights," Ms. Bobo said, appointing Ms. Toomer as its first director.

"She could not have been stronger in her actions and positions, which had an impact on me," Ms. Bobo said.

After retiring in 1990, Ms. Toomer exhibited no signs of slowing down. She was active in the local chapter of the NAACP and joined the Council of Elders of the Black Community of Howard County in conjunction with Howard County public schools, which works to support educational, cultural and social opportunities for the county's African American citizens, and where she chaired the organization's Black Student, Family and Community Network committees.

She chaired the board of the African American Museum of Maryland and was named in 1994 one of Maryland's Most Beautiful People, followed five years later by induction into the Women's Hall of Fame.

She and her husband, who died in 2017, enjoyed the beach, taking cruises and vacationing in Florida and the Caribbean.

Ms. Toomer is survived by a son, David Toomer, of Columbia; three daughters, Debra Toomer, of Miami, Florida, Diana Toomer Burks, of Atlanta, and Donna Toomer Watkins, of Atlanta; nine grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren. Another son, Douglas Toomer, died some years ago.

A homegoing service for Ms. Toomer will be held at 1 p.m. Aug. 14 at Celebration Church, 7101 Riverwood Drive in Columbia.



Toomer