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FEATURED

Lillie A. Estes, 'exemplar' of community organizing, left her mark in Gilpin Court and well beyond

BY MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS Richmond Times-Dispatch 10 hrs ago



Lillie A. Estes unveiled the Charles S. Gilpin Community Farm site plan on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2018. She collaborated with Richmond's parks department to designate the lot as a garden site.

2018, CHRISTOPHER "PUMA" SMITH

Lillie A. Estes, a community organizer and former Richmond mayoral candidate whose influence extended from the grass roots of her public housing community to the halls of Harvard and beyond, was found dead Thursday at her home in Gilpin Court.

She was 59.

Several people interviewed said Ms. Estes had not been feeling well recently. She was discovered after a check by Richmond police and an employee of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

The breadth of her engagement was evident in the outpouring of love, grief and gratitude Thursday night from a cross-section of Richmond.

"95% of the advocacy efforts that I have been a part of originated with Lillie A. Estes," activist Omari Al-Qaddafi posted on Facebook. "She taught me how to be a community organizer. People really have no idea how much impact she has had on this city."

Adria Scharf, executive director of the Richmond Peace Education Center, described Ms. Estes' brand of advocacy as "a glue that connected so many different conversations."

Ms. Estes was one of the founding leaders of RePHRAME — Residents of Public Housing in Richmond Against Mass Eviction. She also served on the board of the Virginia Poverty Law Center and on the advisory council for Hope in the Cities, a Richmond-based organization that promotes racial reconciliation. She served on the advisory board of the mayor's anti-poverty commission, the progenitor of the Office of Community Wealth Building. She established the Community Justice Film Series, whose aim was to engage community members in the democratic process through cinema.

"From the guys living under the bridge to Senator Kaine, she captured all and everyone in between," said Mark Fero, who worked with Ms. Estes on a community-based crime reduction program out of the office of Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring.

David Harris, managing director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard University, worked with Ms. Estes for about a half-dozen years as part of a project on community justice.

Harris called her "the exemplar of an organizer. She always wanted to make sure everyone's voice was part of the decision-making."

"We walked 20 years together," said local activist Art Burton, recalling their advocacy on behalf of tenants in the former Dove Court public housing community in Highland Park. Among other endeavors, they worked together to prod the national NAACP to endorse a resolution calling for one-for-one replacement of public housing units slated for demolition, he said.

"She was not an activist. She would let you know," Burton said. "She was a *strategist*."

Ms. Estes ran for mayor in 2016, calling it the logical next step in her civic engagement.

"I've been involved in community work for 30-plus years," she said. "I've been a public servant. I've been on a lot of boards and commissions. I just see this as the next step in that process."

Last October, she launched the Charles S. Gilpin Community Farm on a vacant lot on St. Peter Street.

"That vacant lot has been a crime hotspot, and I realized that building community interest around food and quality of life are important as a crime-reduction initiative," Estes said at the time for a story in the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

She rallied residents, conveners and funders to establish the farm, with technical assistance and funding from Virginia LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation) and access to pro bono landscape and design resources through Storefront for Community Design.

Ryan Rinn, executive director of Storefront for Community Design, asked for police to check on Ms. Estes after a concerned Harris emailed that he hadn't heard from her.

Thursday night, through tears, Rinn described Ms. Estes as an advocate who was unafraid to tell truth to power and was "always trying to build the next generation."

Ms. Estes worked ceaselessly to make Richmond a more humane place, even as she absorbed the ultimate act of brutality — the slaying of a son. John E. Williams Jr., 23, was discovered dead of gunshot wounds in Essex Village in July 2010.

In September 2011, a Richmond man was acquitted after a judge ruled that there was insufficient evidence to convict him.

"When I buried my son, I made my peace with God," Estes said upon the trial's conclusion. "What happened today was just an example of the court system trying to deal with a situation that was very complex. I have to move on; I have to accept what the judge did."

Scharf recalled Ms. Estes as "a voice for public housing residents in the city. But more generally, she fought heart and soul for the idea and the core beliefs that poor people and affected communities should not just be at the table of policy decisions that affected them, but should be driving the agenda."

Ms. Estes worked to make Richmond "a more just and humane place for all," Scharf said. "We have to keep her spirit alive by continuing the work that she fought for."

Lillie Estes was born in Newport News, the youngest of six children, and was a graduate of Menchville High School, according to her son, Tobias Estes.

She moved in Richmond in 1977 to attend Virginia Commonwealth University, where she earned a bachelor of science degree in administration of justice and public safety in 1983.

"She's always done community stuff," Tobias Estes said. "She was always known as the person who's trying to help people."

He lived with his mom in Gilpin before moving to Arlington County. Recently, they had talked of him returning to Richmond and getting a place together outside of Gilpin.

"We always spoke about her moving out. This year was supposed to be a big year for her," he said. "Even though she was going to move, she still was going to advocate for folks in Gilpin and public housing residents throughout the city."

Community organizer Rebecca Wooden Keel, a protege of Ms. Estes', posted this tribute Thursday on Facebook:

"Thank you for everything you've taught me. I will miss you. Thank you for your work to transform this community. We will miss you. Thank you for pouring yourself into this world."

Funeral arrangements were incomplete early Friday.

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Ms. Estes

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