

Hilda Mason was considered 'grandmother' to all who knew her

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Hilda Mason is remembered in many ways.

Publicly, the Campbell County native was well-known as a member of the Washington D.C. Council, where she served for 20 years.

For many others, though - including black students from segregated schools in Altavista and Washington, D.C. - she was a teacher.

Following Mason's death on Dec. 16, Ms. Magazine called her a veteran feminist. Others called her a "home-rule activist," since she had pushed for the District's statehood.

But Mason called herself "Grandmother to the World."

Perhaps that's how many people, including some of those closest to her, remember her.

"She loved children," said her daughter, Carolyn Dungee Nicholas, of Culpeper. "She had the neighborhood kids over all the time for nuts and raisins," Nicholas said. "That was a trademark."

When she wasn't at home passing out snacks, Mason was known for carrying raisins and fresh, home-roasted cashews and giving them to kids.

According to Nicholas, that was part of an overall attitude her mother had.

"She loved to have fun. She loved to dance. She loved to be with people. She was just a good, loving person," she said.

Her mother's love for people fueled her goals for public service.

Mason was born Hilda Howland Minnis on June 14, 1916, in Lynch Station. Her grandmother was a washerwoman who walked to Altavista daily to pick up laundry.

Nicholas said her mother's upbringing planted the seeds of service.

"Her mother and father, and her grandmother ... were very giving as well, helping everybody in the community, sharing what they had," she said.

"They were good people, and she learned at their knees."

Her father helped a young man escape from the Ku Klux Klan, putting himself in danger, Nicholas said. "He helped white people as well as black people during the Depression, letting them get credit at their store," she said.

Mason's father owned a general store in Lynch Station. Nicholas said the store was burned down by a group of white people, but was reopened in Altavista.

Mason's father never learned to read or write, and always signed his name with an "X." But his children went on to become educated.

Mason graduated from the Virginia Seminary and Theological College, which is now the Virginia University of Lynchburg, in 1934. Then she studied cosmetology at St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville for two years.

In 1936 she returned to Altavista and taught in the segregated schools.

Mason had her eyes set on moving north to escape discrimination. "Not that there wasn't plenty of it up north," Nicholas said.

After marrying a man from Norfolk, having two children and going through a divorce, Mason had another motivation for moving. She wanted to provide her children with a good future.

"She didn't believe that we just had to be disallowed to participate in the opportunities that the white majorities enjoyed," Nicholas said.

Mason moved to the Brookland area of Washington, D.C., in the late 1940s. Her father paid cash for her house, and she eventually repaid him.

Mason went to college full time and worked full time, receiving her teaching degree in 1952. She was a teacher in poor, black schools, where she often used her own income to buy classroom supplies.

Over the next two decades, Mason became a powerful advocate for social change. She joined All Souls Unitarian Church, one of the first racially integrated churches in Washington. There, she met Charlie Mason, a white civil rights activist. They often protested together.

"They fell in love with each other on the picket lines," Nicholas said. "He proposed and they married, and became one person, working for the same causes."

Throughout the '60s, they supported and sponsored programs such as summer enrichment programs and rent subsidies in the neighborhoods surrounding their church.

In 1971 she was elected to the District of Columbia Board of Education. Six years later, D.C. Council member Julius Hobson died in office. Mason had worked with Hobson on several issues and had joined his Statehood Party, which pushed for the District to be admitted as a state. She was elected to replace him on the council in 1977.

Mason fought for many avenues of social change, including rent control, mass transit, affordable health care and housing. She won re-election and served on the council for two decades.

"She represented a very tiny party, and she won despite the party's minuscule ties, and despite the fact that business people were against her," Nicholas said.

"The people loved her, and they kept electing her over and over again. She was for the people," she said.

Mason was 91 when she died last month at Washington Hospital Center.