

## OBITUARY DOROTHY DOBSON

# Housing advocate created services for the needy

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Dorothy Ann Pryor Dobson and her husband, James Dobson, could have been embittered by the racism they faced when looking for a home in the Rochester area in the early 1960s.

One real estate agent told them a house was sold, then proceeded to welcome a white family for a tour minutes later. (The Dobsons stayed to watch from outside.) The Black couple ran into similar roadblocks elsewhere.

The couple turned the experience and others into a lifelong push for equity and justice. James Dobson, a key proponent of affordable housing in Rochester, died in 1997. His wife, who sometimes had been a quiet partner, continued on.

Mrs. Dobson died Nov. 19 at the age of 89.

"They just wanted to make it better, and both of them were in lockstep around that," said Kimberly Dobson, one of the couple's three daughters.

Mr. Dobson died in 1997. Afterward, Mrs. Dobson "was asked to join the board of directors of the IC Housing Development Fund Company, Inc., a non-profit corporation co-founded by her husband," according to the Dobson family. "The board provided oversight of Urban Park Apartments, later re-named as James A. Dobson Apartments, a 254 unit, low-moderate income Rochester housing complex."

She then became managing director of the complex, helping to restore it to a solid performance and reputation, which had slipped with a decline in her hus-

band's health. She was in that position for seven years.

It was unsurprising if not expected that Mrs. Dobson would pick up the mantle of her husband, Kimberly Dobson said.

"They were best friends," she said. "The thing about them is that they allowed each other to be their unique and authentic selves, but they did not do so in a way that centered themselves individually."

"They did it in a way that connected each other to each other and extended to each other."

## Early life and Rochester connections built by Dobsons

Mrs. Dobson was born in 1934 in Chester, Virginia, a Richmond suburb. From a young age on she was an active participant in school, church and civic organizations.

She met her husband at what then was North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, where they both were students. After graduation in 1957, the two married and settled in Rochester.

A social worker, she worked at the Rochester Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Children and Rochester Psychiatric Center. She was later hired as a social worker at the Monroe County Department of Social Services, where she worked for 31 years before retirement.

Mrs. Dobson was one of a number of Black employees of the county department who sued, reporting that they were unfairly withheld from promotions and management positions. The county settled the lawsuit and opened the door for

the advancement of Black workers.

Fran Weisberg, who headed the local United Way and the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency, knew Dobson from the former Regional Council on Aging. Weisberg also headed that organization while Dobson was a board member.

"She had amazing guts and spirit," Weisberg said. "She really was into social change and looking at systems way before the rest of us did at the community. Whether it was school lunch for feeding kids or something else, she would set up a system. It wasn't just for one person."

That was a trait passed onto her children. When only 11, the Dobson's oldest daughter, Jacquelyn Dobson, put together a fundraiser in their Rochester neighborhood on Rockingham Street.

"She organized a carnival for kids that needed money to help them go to camp," Kimberly Dobson said. "Jackie spearheaded all of that."

That giving spirit was a direct offspring from their mother, said Gina Dobson, another of their daughters.

"She (was) emblematic of unconditional love," Gina Dobson said. With every individual, "she looked at their potential."

And she always made an impression, Weisberg said. "She was so elegant," she said. "When she walked into a room you knew it. Her hats were legendary and her clothes ... What a stunning woman."

## A bevy of activities

Mrs. Dobson's list of activities and social work reads like the resume of a dozen people.

According to her family, she was "a



**Dobson**

charter member of the Rochester Chapter of Jack and Jill of America, Inc., The Office of Black Ministries (Catholic Diocese of Rochester), and the 12:15 Gospel Choir at Immaculate Conception Catholic

Church.

She also founded the first predominantly Black chapter in western New York of the American Association of Retired Persons. She stayed active in Parent Teacher Associations and was one of the founders of the Human Rights Committee at School 24.

She also was a board member of the Girls Scouts USA-Genesee Valley Chapter, the United Way of Rochester and Catholic Charities. She co-founded the Bridgette's of Rochester — the first Black women's bridge club in Rochester.

In 2017, her alma mater, now called North Carolina A&T State University, presented her with its Human Rights Medal. "The award is given annually by North Carolina A&T to recognize individuals who have endeavored to correct social injustice and significantly contributed to the betterment of the world," the university said of the honor.

Mrs. Dobson was predeceased by her husband and three brothers. She is survived by her daughters and a sister.

## NEWS TIPS

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