

IRIS BANISTER 1947-2024



Iris Banister, chair of the Martin Luther King Jr. Greater Rochester Commission, leads the Pledge of Allegiance during a community 2013 celebration of King's life and work. Banister died Monday at 77 years old. ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

ROCHESTER'S 'QUEEN MOTHER'

Longtime educator devoted her life to improving community

Justin Murphy
Rochester Democrat
and Chronicle
USA TODAY NETWORK

Iris Banister, a pioneering Black educator and community leader in Rochester for more than 50 years, died Monday at age 77. • The cause of death was pancreatic cancer. Her son, Rochester Area Community Foundation President Simeon Banister, announced her death in a social media post Monday night. • She was known to many as Queen Mother, an honorific first bestowed upon her by a village in Ghana where she helped establish a dental clinic, early education center, entrepreneurial program and other services.

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Iris Banister in a community workshop in 1997. ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

Banister

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In Rochester, Banister was best known as a teacher and administrator in the city school district, where she spent 32 years. Her greatest emphasis was on understanding and supporting students in a holistic and culturally affirming way, a pedagogical principle that in recent years has become more widely accepted.

"She was out there affirming the culture and goodness that could be brought out in the kids long before it was popular to do so," said Idonia Owens, another longtime RCSD administrator. "Kids loved her. They had a sense of respect for Iris — she could walk into a

room and the kids would automatically quiet and hear what she had to say."

Banister held a variety of other community leadership posts after retiring from RCSD. She was executive director of Wilson Commencement Park and also of The Children's Zone, an effort to coordinate services in northeast Rochester.

She founded a counseling and support service for women called NAMOW, served as a charter school principal and wrote and lectured widely on education and child development.

Banister was "one of Rochester's most fervent and beloved advocates for our citizens," Mayor Malik Evans said in a statement. "Her commitment and dedication to peace and nonviolence, education and multi-cultural

relations in her professional and personal life will be an example to the Rochester community for generations to come."

Iris Banister was born in Oklahoma City in 1947. She was attending Jarvis Christian College in Texas when she was recruited to teach in Rochester starting in 1969, part of RCSD's first major attempt to diversify its teaching corps.

"I came on the premise that Black folk were needed as role models for Black children," she said in 1976. "We brought a twinge of the South up north to make your program better."

She sat on the board of numerous community organizations, including the Urban League of Rochester, the Marketview Heights Neighborhood Association, the Greater Rochester Martin Luther King Commission and the United Negro College Fund Planning Committee. Her husband, Thomas Banister, was president of North East Area Development (NEAD); he died in 2016.

Iris Banister is survived by her three sons, among other family. Funeral arrangements have not been announced.

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