

Randolph C. Kendall Jr., who led the Richmond Urban League for three decades, dies

*By Randy Hallman
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For 29 years, Randolph C. Kendall Jr. led the Richmond Urban League, improving the lot of the poor and engaging the whole community in that endeavor.

Mr. Kendall died of heart failure Monday at a Richmond-area hospital. He was 78.

A funeral will be held Saturday at noon at Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in Mechanicsville, where he had long been a member and officer. Interment will follow at Oakwood Cemetery.

Mr. Kendall grew up in Atlanta and earned his undergraduate degree at Clark College there, then his master's degree in social work at Atlanta University.

He spent his entire professional career with the Urban League, working in Tampa, Fla., St. Louis and Oklahoma City before coming to Richmond in 1968 to take the position of CEO and president of the city's branch.

With him was his wife, Alice Ruth Kendall, who was married to him for nearly 50 years. "He just came to do the job he was hired for," she recalled. "The community accepted him. He accepted the community. Richmond became home."

Mrs. Kendall said her husband "got along with everybody. The Urban League's board was diverse, and he made it clear that his mission was to better the whole community."

Mr. Kendall took a positive approach to identifying and addressing the problems faced by the city's poor, but he was a realist, too. In 1977, nearly a decade into his tenure at the helm of the organization, he talked with a young reporter about the intractable problem of poverty.

"My speculation," he said, "is that in my lifetime I won't see it solved. I doubt if in your lifetime you'll see it solved. I doubt that in your child's lifetime it is going to get solved."

"I think it's unfortunate that our economy is built in such a way that whether you have (agencies like the Urban League) or not, you're going to need something to try to deal with the poor citizens. ... I think there'll be poor people from now on unless the system totally changes."



Credit: 1989, Times-Dispatch
Randolph C. Kendall Jr. spent his entire professional career with the Urban League. He came to Richmond in 1968.

In 1980, Thomas J. Victory went to work for Mr. Kendall and was with him through Mr. Kendall's retirement in 1997. Since 2004, Victory has been the Richmond Urban League's president.

"He was a great mentor," Victory said. "He worked hard. He was always, always the last one to leave. He didn't mind working Saturdays. He was completely involved with making things happen.

"And when we had successful outcomes, he didn't take the credit himself. He gave the credit to the Urban League and his staff."

Mr. Kendall expanded the organization during his tenure, opening a second office on the city's South Side.

He worked to ensure that affordable housing existed and initiated a program to educate lower-income families in the responsibilities and realities of purchasing a home.

He spearheaded an apprenticeship project aimed at providing technical skills to Richmond high school students.

He helped set up an annual seminar with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to educate employers and prospective employees. The latest of the seminars was held just three days before Mr. Kendall died.

He was also a car buff, Victory said. "He had a mid-'60s Volkswagen, and he loved that car. I had a 1968 Mustang, so we shared our fondness for old cars.

"Mind you, they weren't show cars. We drove them to work. We were always talking about keeping them running. If I called to say I was trying to get my Mustang started and might be late, he understood."

Mr. Kendall was the kind of boss everyone wants, Victory said.

"He made you better," he said. "He kept you involved, gave you advice. And there was no drama. You knew you were working for the community and you were going to do the best possible job."

In addition to his wife, Mr. Kendall's survivors include a son, Richard C. Kendall III of Richmond, and a grandchild.