

The world's best mortician: Richard Estes was MUL 2012 Trailblazer

Written by
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Richard Estes passed away peacefully May 29th, 2013, at Abbott Northwestern Hospital surrounded by his family. At funeral services Saturday, June 8, at Zion Baptist Church in North Minneapolis, his nephew and mentee, Tracy Wesley, tearfully declared, "He was the best mortician in the whole world."

Community builder Spike Moss praised Estes for his pioneering entrepreneurial spirit and for his selfless commitment to the community. Moss also chastised members of our community who "depended on Mr. Estes when they didn't have the money to provide a decent, dignified burial for their loved ones. With Mr. Estes they found compassionate generosity. But some of the same families, when insurance proceeds were available, would take their business to white-owned funeral homes," Moss said.

"The indignity Mr. Estes suffered," Moss said, "was that the white funeral homes would call him to come in the night and prepare the Black bodies for burial ceremonies."

Moss encouraged Estes' successors to continue to hold high the standard of excellence that has become the trademark of the Estes Funeral Chapel, and he challenged the Black community to support this and other Black-owned businesses who serve our community and the general market, and in doing so, create a viable economy for our people.

Estes was born February 5, 1929, in Baxter Springs, Kan., to the late Ray and Veoma (Woolridge) Estes. He was the second of four children. The Estes family had a very strong bond during his youth and beyond, and they were raised in the church. His mother, Veoma, was a gifted pianist and music teacher and started Richard and his three siblings, Rayma, Margie, and Fred singing in a group called the Estes Four Quartet. Ray, his father, was the senior deacon at Mount Olive Baptist Church and ran his farming operation. The children learned work ethic,

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perseverance and determination at an early age.

As the most significant role models in his life, his parents laid the foundation for his development and character. In addition, he also was exposed to other role models in his family during his youth who left an indelible impression on him—his three uncles, the late John Estes, William Estes and Garland Woolridge. All were licensed morticians and funeral directors who owned their own funeral homes and served the greater communities of Coffeyville, Kan., Des Moines, Iowa, and Los Angeles, Calif. Estes observed the service, dedication care, and comfort they provided families in the communities they served and had a desire in his heart to serve humanity as they did, and he set his life's path to do so.

In 1948, Estes graduated from Baxter Springs High School and attended Pittsburg State University. In 1951, during his senior year in college, he was drafted into the U.S. Marine Air Corps at Eltora Air Base in Santa Ana, Calif., where he served for two years. Determined to achieve his goal of becoming a mortician, following his tour of duty, Estes entered the California College of Mortuary Science in Los Angeles. As a full-time student, he also worked full time studying in the early morning hours and on weekends. His dedication and work ethic paid off, and graduated with a degree in Mortuary Science in December, 1956. Well-equipped with knowledge and credentials, Estes wanted to be trained by the best, so he returned to his roots. He moved to Des Moines and served an apprenticeship under his uncle, John Estes for five years. There he learned to exercise the care, concern, compassion, and service customers have come to know and experience throughout the last 51 years.

In the early 1960s, Estes moved to Minneapolis, Minn., and joined Woodard Funeral Home. With the Estes-Woodard entrepreneurial seed planted, he had a desire to launch his own business to serve the community in a way that was consistent with his vision, values and conviction. He believed in "doing things the old-fashioned way—working to earn your way." He continued to work diligently until he raised enough capital and initially partnered with his brother, Fred Estes and brother-in-law, the late John Wiggins, to purchase an existing business at Humboldt and Plymouth Avenues in north Minneapolis, opening Estes Funeral Home in 1962. He served the community at that location for 25 years, several of those years alongside his son, Kenneth Estes and his niece Kimberly Wright who also is a licensed mortician. Understanding the importance of ownership, Estes later became a sole proprietor. Persevering through barriers of entry for his new business and purchasing his own land, in May, 1987, he built and opened the new Estes Funeral Chapel, a state-of-the-art facility, at 2210 Plymouth Avenue North, where he faithfully served the community for 25 years. His niece, Lisa Estes, and nephew, Tracy Wesley, both licensed morticians, worked alongside him. This facility is a prominent landmark in north Minneapolis and is a testament to his faith in God, hard work and business acumen.

Not only was Estes an exceptional businessman, he also was a conscientious community servant. He was a faithful member of Zion Baptist Church for 56-years. Other community affiliations include: The Cantorians, the Alpha, Psi chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Palestine Lodge #7 - Prince Hall Affiliation MN Jurisdiction, North Star Consistory #14, Fezzine Temple #26 AONMS - Prince Hall Affiliation, University of Minnesota School of Mortuary Science, Boyfriend to the Minneapolis/St. Paul Chapter of The Girl Friends, Inc., and served as former president of the Minneapolis District VI affiliated with the Minnesota Funeral Directors

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Association. He was a generous supporter of several non-profit organizations such as the UNCF and the Northside YMCA. In addition, he believed in supporting career development programs for students pursuing mortuary science and worked with the University of Minnesota African-American Students in Mortuary Science Board. Many students completed their practicums under his direction at Estes Funeral Chapel. To honor Richard and April for their kind generosity to the community, the Northside community dedicated a Peace Garden at the original Estes Funeral Home site.

Estes received several notable awards throughout his career, but most recently, he was the recipient of the Trail Blazer Award through the Minneapolis Urban League. The award recognizes those who have achieved more than 30 years of successful business ownership. He also was recognized by the Givens Foundation for African-American Literature in appreciation of his leadership and investment in acquiring the Archie Givens, Sr., collection of African-American literature for the community.

Richard Estes and April Martin Estes were united in marriage on December 29, 1972. April, his wife of 43 years, survives him. Other survivors include his children, Kenneth Leon Estes of Yuma, Ariz.; April Leann Estes (Russell) of Minneapolis, Minn.; Brittani Clay Estes of Minneapolis, Minn.; Myles Ray Estes of Minneapolis, Minn; step-son, D. Craig Taylor (Teresa) of St. Paul, Minn; sister, Margie Estes Wright of Baxter Springs, Kan.; brother, Fred Estes of Golden Valley, Minn.; sister-in-laws Mildred Brown of Louisville, Ky.; Carrie Donnelly of Chicago, Ill.; Francis Murrell of Fort Scott, Kan.; brother-in-laws Hayes Thompson of Chicago, Ill; and Meldon Wesley of Olathe, Kan.; granddaughters, Ashley LaRon Estes, Kennisha Nicole Estes both of Baton Rouge, La.; godchildren Jennifer Bluford of Chicago, Ill. and John Bluford of Kansas City, Mo.; and a host of nieces, nephews and close friends.