

Matthew Little remembered

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Civil rights leader and former head of the Minnesota and Minneapolis chapters of the NAACP, Matthew Little, died Sunday, Jan. 26 at the age of 92.

A World War II veteran, Little moved to Minneapolis in 1948 and soon became active in civil rights after he was denied the opportunity to serve as a firefighter, even though he passed the written and physical exams. Little would later lead the fight that desegregated the department. He also led the fight for fair housing in Minnesota and for equal education in state public schools.

"My father was a man who had undying love for his people," said Titilayo Bediako, Little's daughter. "If you look at my father's life it's always been one of service. He said we as a people must give our best. He wouldn't accept second. He was about putting African-American people at the front."

Condolences for Little poured in from throughout the community.

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"Matt Little was a true civil rights leader in Minnesota, and was one of my good friends and mentors when I ran for office," said Sen. Amy Klobuchar. "From leading the state's delegation to the March on Washington to his presidency of the Minnesota NAACP to his active participation in the African-American Leadership Council in St. Paul into his 90s, Matt never stopped fighting for equality and justice. Minnesota is a fairer and freer state because of his lifelong advocacy, and his legacy will be remembered for generations to come."

Fourth District Congresswoman Betty McCollum called Little a longtime friend.

"Matt Little was a remarkable leader and friend, and the impact of his life's work fighting for equality and justice can be felt across Minnesota and the country to this day," said McCollum. "I had the pleasure of knowing Matt for nearly 30 years and he was a wonderful mentor to me as we worked together on progressive issues. I was honored to have Matt nominate me for the DFL party endorsement during my first campaign for Congress. He brought a fierce passion to his work but was among the gentlest souls you could ever hope to meet. I will miss Matt dearly and carry on his passion for justice and equality through my work. My prayers are with Matt's wife Lucille, family members, and all the friends who loved him."

Minnesota's only African-American state legislators, Sen. Jeffrey Hayden (DFL-Minneapolis), Sen. Bobby Joe Champion (DFL-Minneapolis) and Rep. Rena Moran (DFL-St. Paul) released a joint statement to show their gratitude for Little.

"Today we honor Matthew Little – our friend, our mentor and a hero of Minnesota's civil rights movement," said the trio in a statement. "Matt will always be remembered for his immeasurable contributions to the advancement of racial justice and civil rights; but we will remember him most for his constructive mentoring and the encouragement he gave so many local African-American leaders that looked up to him.

"We stand on Matthew Little's strong and secure shoulders. He encouraged each of us to become educated on the issues and grow as leaders in our communities. He showed us how to achieve meaningful change by working through the political and legal systems. Most importantly, he paved the way, giving us the confidence and the drive to continue his struggle for social justice, always with the overriding values of non-violence, understanding, and optimism for the future.

We are forever grateful for Matthew's Little's leadership, his courageous actions and his inspiring words. Matthew brought his struggles to life through his stories of the discrimination he faced and how he prevailed against injustice. He rose to become President of the local NAACP chapter and became a tireless voice in fighting inequity in education, housing and hiring. So, although we grieve for our friend today, we are comforted in the knowledge that his life has opened up so many possibilities for our children and grandchildren, and inspired each of us to take up the cause of liberty and justice for all."

Bediako, one of five of Little's children, said her father was a tireless leader and a great father. She said in addition to heading the area's NAACP and working with the state's DFL Party, Little worked fulltime with the United States Postal Service for 33 years and ran his own lawn care

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business.

"My father was an example of Black excellence," said Bediako. "For those who don't think African-American men don't have it going on, they better look at the life of Matthew Little. He's just one example of African-American men doing great things."