

Iris Banister: Community Educator, Advocate, and Activist

Rev. Iris Jean Sulcer Banister, Ed.D, a passionate educator, advocate, and community activist, passed away March 11 after a valiant battle with pancreatic cancer. She was 77.

She was born in 1947 to Iris and Mable Sulcer in Oklahoma, where she lived until she graduated from college and moved to Rochester for a teaching job in 1969. It was here that she met Thomas A. Banister Jr. at a social event, and they married soon afterwards.

Throughout her life she was committed to empowering women and girls during her education career, in the Rochester community and even in West Africa.

For 32 years, Banister was employed by the Rochester City School District as an elementary teacher, reading specialist, guidance counselor, transition facilitator, and house administrator and later program administrator for Senior High Alternative Program for Education (SHAPE), a program for at-risk middle school students.

“Iris was someone who loved children and the process of educating children,” said former Rochester Mayor William A. Johnson Jr., who knew the Banister family for decades. “Her advocacy on behalf of Rochester’s children was very, very strong. She had a great commitment to all children in her care to get the best education possible.

Banister retired from RCSD in 2001, but her retirement did not last long. She was hired as principal of the Charter School of Science and Technology. “I had to do this,” Banister said at the time. “It’s the fulfillment of a dream. I’ve always wanted to lead a school whose ultimate goal is student achievement and that’s willing to do anything to meet that goal.”

After the school closed in 2005, a battle Banister fought with the state Education Department, she became executive director at Wilson Commencement Park, which provided transitional housing for single parents and their children along with support services for families. One of her first projects was raising money for Destiny, an 18-apartment complex specifically for those parents dealing with mental health issues.

As an educator and a passionate advocate for community empowerment, she made a lasting and meaningful impact on many lives.

Cherri Hawkins first met Banister, then a guidance counselor, when she was a student at Franklin High School. Over time, the two grew closer. After Hawkins’ own mother died several years ago, she often looked to Banister for guidance and advice. “She became my best friend, my mom, my mentor, my confidante ... and I was a daughter to her.”

Banister encouraged her to go back to school, after many years, to get her master’s degree — and Hawkins did. “I was being tested during that time, and she gave me tools I will keep with me for the rest of my life.”

Banister never shied away from a tough assignment. In 2008 she was tapped to lead the embattled Rochester Surround Care Community Corp., formerly known as the Rochester Children's Zone, which launched in 2005 to coordinate community services in northeast Rochester. She resigned after less than a year, but not before she could publicly highlight all the good work the organization had done, including:

- Creating a telemedicine program for children in a partnership with other organizations;
- Initiating neighborhood clean-up projects;
- Organizing informal gatherings with police, teens, and children;
- Holding a community summit to help set goals and built partnerships with church leaders;
- Distributing backpacks to students;
- Going door-to-door with firefighters to pass out smoke detectors; and
- Organizing an anti-violence conference.

Banister was founder and chief facilitator of NAMOW (woman spelled backwards), a counseling, support and referral service for women and their children, and founder and senior consultant of Darcus Inc., a consulting firm that provided training facilitation, presentation on a variety of topics in the areas of cultural diversity, parent empowerment and early childhood.

"She lived life fully, and modeled and taught the way to so many people," Dr. Marilyn Patterson Grant, a friend and former City School District administrator, posted on Facebook.

Education was highly valued by Banister, and she never stopped learning. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in education from Jarvis Christian College in Texas, she was recruited to teach in Rochester and, once here, got a master's degree in urban education from SUNY Geneseo. Later, she completed a master's degree in education administration from SUNY Brockport, a doctorate in theological counseling from Master's International School of Divinity in Indiana, and a doctorate in education and human development at University of Rochester. Banister was an adjunct professor of religion and African American Studies at St. John Fisher University and an education consultant.

Banister was highly active in the community she called home for more than 50 years. She was chair of the Greater Rochester Martin Luther King Jr. Commission, president of the Rochester Association of Black Social Workers and the Center for Dispute Settlement. Banister served on the boards of Urban League of Rochester, United Way, MarketView Heights Neighborhood Association, and Jefferson Avenue Day Care Center and was chair of the International Exchange Committee and Concerned Citizens Committee of Rochester Black Agenda Conference.

Her participation in community groups was extensive. The groups included: United Nations Committee; YMCA; Women in Industry Committee; Sister Cities; Parent Leadership Coalition; Geneseo College Council; United Negro College Fund; United Way's African American Leadership Development; Greater Rochester Women Fund;

Debutante Cotillion; Franklin Parent Resource Organization; Action for a Better Community; Coalition for Downtown; the Window Project; Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program; Lead Coalition; Coalition of North East Associations; and Grapevine Black Women United for Change.

Banister's devotion to her community was recognized with numerous citations and awards that included City of Rochester's Pioneer Award, Mayor's Renaissance Award for Outstanding Education, MLK Achievement Award for Civic Engagement, Howard Coles Society Award, 2001 NY State Humanitarian Award, and Rochester Mayor's Unsung Heroes Award.

Nationally, she was a Golden Soror with Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and involved with the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Club, Inc., National Council of Women, and the Harlem Nation Black Theatre.

Many have experienced Banister's power and aura in our community and beyond. Described as a force of nature, she was a much sought-after speaker, especially in houses of worship across the community.

In 2001, she was given the honorific title of Queen Mother, Nana Ama Bortsewa in Winneba, Ghana. Her work there included sponsoring digging of water wells, building a fully equipped dental clinic and a tuition-free, 110-student early childhood educational center, doing radio shows translated into 32 local languages, and helping to launch self-help projects on fiscal management for Ghanaian women.

She is survived by her sons, Rev. Dr. Thomas (Tarsha) Banister III, Simeon (Akilah) Banister, and Rev. Ethan (Fatima) Banister; five grandchildren; and several siblings.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

The family requests that contributions in her memory be made to the Iris and Thomas Banister Memorial Fund at the Community Foundation (www.racf.org/Banister).