

Remembering Pete Rawlings, 1937-2003

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Commentary

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AFRO File Photo

This week, as we celebrated Thanksgiving and gave thanks for our families, our health and all of the other blessings in our lives, my thoughts kept returning to my friendship with Pete Rawlings.

Howard Peters Rawlings spent his earliest years in Baltimore's Poe Homes public housing project. When he finally succumbed to cancer on Nov. 14, he had become one of the most influential and respected leaders of our state.

Despite daily hardships, Pete Rawlings' parents, Howard Toussaint and Beatrice Peters Rawlings, instilled in him the core values that would serve him as the foundation for a life of integrity and service.

Pete was born during the Great Depression, an era of our history when few Americans expected a lifetime of exemplary achievement from any young African American.

The young man was not deterred by those low expectations. His dedication to excellence led him to academic success at Baltimore's Douglass High School.

That same determination to excel carried him forward until he had earned his bachelor's at Morgan State University, his master's in mathematics at the University of Wisconsin and the experience that would transform him into a master teacher.

Pete was called to public service, and I was privileged to serve with him in the Maryland House of Delegates for nearly 14 years. During all that time, there was never a

day when Pete forgot from where he had come.

He was determined to make his life-long fight for better schools, health care and housing the center of our state's legislative priorities. More often than not, he succeeded.

As a result, Pete Rawlings was the driving force behind the public debates about expanding financial support for our public schools, reorganizing Maryland's system of higher education, extending access to health care and creating more safe and affordable housing for tens of thousands of Maryland families.

He consistently synchronized his conscience with his conduct. When Pete and I would talk about critical public policy issues, he would invariably say that he simply wanted the same opportunities and protections for all of Maryland's children that he wanted for his own.

The source of much of Pete's influence can be traced to his chairmanship of the Maryland House Appropriations Committee. Yet, those of us who were privileged to know and work with him understood that his influence did not derive from his position of power alone.

As Dr. Steven Carter once observed, "true leaders are defined by their integrity." Leaders of integrity have the capacity to discern right from wrong, and they act upon what they know to be right, even if that commitment places them in peril.

Dr. Carter's insights about integrity are exemplified by Pete Rawlings' lifetime of service to the people of our community and state.

In his commitment to the education of our children,

health care for all and fair housing, "the chairman," as Pete came to be called, consistently followed his vision of what is right, both for the present and for the generations to come.

All too often, men and women in public life worry too much about the next election. A true statesman, however, worries about the next generation and children yet unborn.

Pete Rawlings was such a statesman - and for that, he earned our lasting gratitude.

At times, Pete was rewarded for his integrity by harsh criticism. Yet, he remained steadfast.

He knew that the course that he followed was opening the doors to opportunity for many who otherwise would be left on the outside looking in.

He understood that creating positive social change requires that we be actively involved in raising the next generation of leaders. Last year, for example, Pete unselfishly worked with the late Sen. Clarence W. Blount and me to help elect Sen. Lisa A. Gladden (D-41), often communicating with me 10 times a day during the campaign.

Pete Rawlings did not seek celebrity or acclaim, but generations to come will remember him as a true and faithful servant who earned the trust of the people he served.

Despite all of the obstacles that he was forced to overcome in his life, Pete never ever gave up. With his passing, the people of Maryland have lost a true leader, a man who continued working for the people he served from his hospital bed until his death.

I have lost a good and dear friend, a man of integrity. I thank God, however, that he allowed Pete Rawlings' life to eclipse my own.

At this difficult time for Pete's wife, Nina, and their wonderful family, I join all of the people of our state in offering them our prayers, and sharing with them our gratitude to Pete for a life well lived.

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, a Democrat, represents Maryland's 7th Congressional District and chairs the Congressional Black Caucus.