

Julius Hobson Sr. Dies

By Cynthia Gorney Washington Post Staff Writer

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Activist Stirred Up City for 25 Years

By Cynthia Gorney

Washington Post Staff Writer

Julius Hobson Sr. died yesterday at age 54 of the cancer that would not let him fight any more.

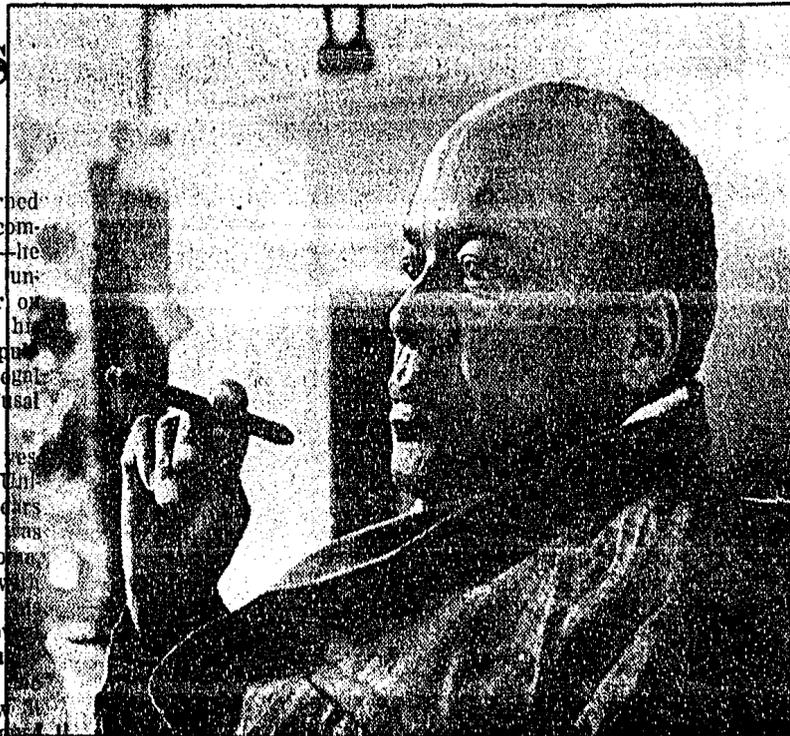
When he died he was a city councilman—the at-large representative of the party seeking statehood for the District of Columbia. He worked almost full-time until the day before his death, when he attended his last City Council meeting.

Behind him stretched an extraordinary record of achievement in local civil rights and educational reform: the lawsuit that ended tracking in Washington schools, the picket lines that opened downtown hiring to blacks, the demonstrations and speeches and pointed theatrics that unsettled Washington for 25 years.

"I sleep mad," Mr. Hobson used

to say. A Marxist who never learned the fine political art of moral compromise—and never wanted to—he spent his adult life waging an unorthodox and often lonely war on the racism that had shaped his childhood. His weapons were publicity, statistics, the American legal system, and an implacable refusal to let things be.

His death shortly after noon yesterday at George Washington University Hospital came six years after Mr. Hobson learned he was sick—first with multiple myeloma, a cancer of the spine, and then with acute leukemia, which sapped his resistance to infection and allowed internal complications to finally kill him. It was an illness he loathed, not because he knew it would kill him, but rather because it ate away at the enormous and



Julius Hobson Sr. ... the small successes added up to the real victory. Photo by Charles Halpern—The Washington Post (1973)

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Julius Hobson Sr. Activist, Dies at Age 54

Exhorting and prodding, manipulating the press and ignoring the hesitant, Mr. Hobson infuriated as many as he inspired. He was told that he wanted too much, that he pushed too hard, that he didn't understand people. He was called a maverick, a egomaniac, a gadfly, a hero. Mr. Hobson knew all that. "When you take the negative position and you're always screaming," he reflected, a few months before his death, "people are going to brand you as they see fit."

There are no real victories, Mr. Hobson would tell people, no comfortable resting places. He believed there is no God to make things better in the end. There is only the here and now, and the small successes that propel you to the next fight.

For 20 years his presence rocked Washington: Mr. Hobson climbing into a hospital bed in a white ward and refusing to leave. Mr. Hobson stepping onto a wooden crate in Lincoln Park and demanding that people listen. Mr. Hobson driving toward Georgetown with a cage full of rats on the roof of his car, suggesting the rich share a problem they said was unsolvable, and then stealing away from the television cameras to drop the rats in the Potomac River. Mr. Hobson under picket signs, behind microphones, in police vans—always with his hat and his pipe (or cigar) and his rich, strident Alabama voice.



And there was the private Julius Hobson, who seemed to draw sustenance from conflict and the certainty that he could not be pushed and a number of other medals. The husband who emerged from the furious protests so invigorated that he would do all the grocery shopping and lunge into the preparation of dinner. The soldier who memorized poetry and try while flying World War II artillery. The spotter and continued to recite the words of this private music 20 years later. The Alabama kid who, way back around 1930, sat by the window on rainy days with Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass," reading the scene where a mad queen seeks justice by crying, "Sentence first, Verdict afterward!"

"I understood it even then," he later recalled.

Mr. Hobson was born in 1922 in Birmingham, Ala., where there were streets where blacks could not walk. The church of Mr. Hobson's mother, the church still attended by his mother, Irma Reynolds, shocked much of white America into an awareness of the "civil rights movement in 1960 when it was shattered by a bomb that killed four children.

Julius Hobson Sr. and his wife, Tina, in their home in Washington, D.C. in 1968. Hobson is on the left, wearing a dark suit and tie, and Tina is on the right, wearing a light-colored dress. They are both looking towards the camera.

When Mr. Hobson left CORE, he took his closest associates with him, and together they formed a new organization called Associated Community Teams (ACT). The activism was as flamboyant as ever, although sometimes ACT focused as much debate on Mr. Hobson as it did on the problem. As a member of the Advisory Committee to the Chief of Police, Hobson built a long-range microphone and drove around after police officers, recording their abuse of civilians. Police and city officials protested, but tapes proved his point.

When Mr. Hobson suggested in August, 1964, that Georgetown share the city's rat problem—and then drove through the city displaying a cage of possum-sized rats, which he said would be released in Georgetown if the city expended far more energy trying to stop Hobson's forays than it would in killing rats. But people noticed they watched the cages cruise by and knew the rats had come from the ghetto. Shaking up the complacency was much of what Julius Hobson had in mind.

Besides, there was a far more serious project under way. Armed with graphs and statistics compiled after months of research, Mr. Hobson was suing the Washington public schools, the suit, called Hobson vs. Hansell, then city school Supt. Carl Hansell, argued that more than a decade after desegregation, the school system was discriminating against black students by channeling them to the lower rungs of rigid academic tracks that received inadequate resources and discouraged achievement. On June 19, 1967, the federal court agreed. In a sweeping decision labeled one of the most important school rulings since desegregation, U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge James Skelly Wright abolished the track system and ordered substantial integration of school students and overcrowded black schools should be closed to the undercapacity white schools west of Rock Creek Park. That day, Mr. Hobson declared, was "a monument to the cynicism of the power structure which governs the voteless capital, the greatest country on earth."

Mr. Hobson's father had died when Julius was very young. The young Hobson's stepfather ran a drycleaning plant and drugstore, and his mother was a school-teacher and principal. His background has been called middle class, a term Mr. Hobson found irritating.

"I don't see how you can grow up middle class and be black," he said not long before he died. "A man who can't go into public parks, can't go to a store and try on a suit, can't drink from a public fountain, can't ride in front of a public vehicle like a streetcar—how are you going to be middle class?"

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It was a home, Mr. Hobson said, where education mattered deeply. The dinner table talk was of learning and schools. He worked in the public library as a boy, where he could sweep the floors, but could not check out books, according to library rules.

So he stole one. The book was the Home Book of Verse of the English Speaking World, a 3,900-page anthology of the poems he learned by heart and recited quietly to himself for the rest of his life. Forty years later, wearing a bathrobe and the neck brace that eased the pain of spinal cancer, Mr. Hobson could gaze out the window of his Southwest Washington apartment and remember "The Prisoner of Chillon," the Lord Byron poem he loved: "There are seven pillars of Gothic mold/in Chillon's dungeons deep and old..."

In Birmingham Mr. Hobson attended what was then called Industrial High School, the only black high school in the city's segregated school system. At his graduation, as he told the story later, the school superintendent stopped by and listened to the class sing spirituals. "When we got through singing, this white superintendent was mopping tears from his eyes," Mr. Hobson recalled. "He said, 'I'm sure God's got a place set aside in heaven for you people.' That did it. I never sang another spiritual."

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Wistfully, of his illness, "I can't find anybody that's willing to attack Julius Hobson. I'm not used to that. I'm used to being attacked all day, every day and defending. In fact, I used to thrive on it..."

own 10-year-old daughter Jean from public to private school after she was assigned to the lowest track, was just later, in the first local election held in Washington during this century, and received so many votes that he was the only candidate who did not have to enter a runoff. Mr. Hobson carried six of the city's eight wards, focusing only on the predominant white areas in Southwest and west of Rock Creek Park.

Mr. Hobson's private life had suffered as his public life grew. In 1968, his wife Carol filed for divorce. Mr. Hobson and his son later said the marriage had been troubled by religious differences and Mr. Hobson's commitment to activism at the expense of his family.

Mr. Hobson lived alone for a while and then three months after the Wright decision he invited the National Institute for Public Affairs employee with whom he had lunched once, to his apartment for dinner. He fixed her a steak with homemade barbecue sauce, drove her to his apartment in Georgetown, and asked her to marry him.

"I want you to know that my intentions in taking you out are perfect," Tina Hobson remembered him saying. A divorcee with two sons, Tina Lower had grown up "middle class white," as Mr. Hobson used to say, in Southern California. They saw each other for two years, ignoring the comments of some local activists that Hobson "talked black but dated white." In 1969, they announced the engagement—on the night Hobson lost his bid for re-election to the school board.

"If there was anything he lost that he felt he should have won, it was that election," Mrs. Hobson said. "Otherwise, I don't think he ever felt anybody owed him anything."

Mr. Hobson had spent a stormy year on the school board, pushing the addition of black studies and a student due process procedure so controversial that at one point teachers walked out in protest, saying discipline had fallen apart. But as in the past, much of his time was spent soberly collecting data for a legal attack on District schools. The school system, Hobson charged, was spending far more on some schools than on others.

Again, Judge Wright agreed. In September, 1970, Wright declared that "the richest and whitest area of the city, is being substantially favored over poorer and blacker areas." The judge answered Mr. Hobson's second

