

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 model you to the great things
by Cynthia Gorney—The Washington Post (1973)

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Julius Hobson Sr. Activist, Dies at Age 54

By B. O. ...

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 that rich share a problem they said was unsolvable, and then stealing away from the television cameras to drown 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 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 in a 1972 series of Washington Post interviews. But, after a disappointing words of this private music 20 years later, The Alabama kid who, way back gave up, took the train to Washington around 1930, sat by the window on a rainy day with Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass," reading the scene where a mad queen mocks justice by crying, "Sentence first—Verdict afterward!"

"I understood it even then," Mr. Hobson 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 1968 when it was shattered by a bomb that killed four children.

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 into 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?"

It was a home, Mr. Hobson said, where education mattered deeply, where 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."

Mr. Hobson went to Tuskegee Institute after college, but was called away to Europe as an Army pilot. He flew 35 missions in Europe.



as a young activist in the District



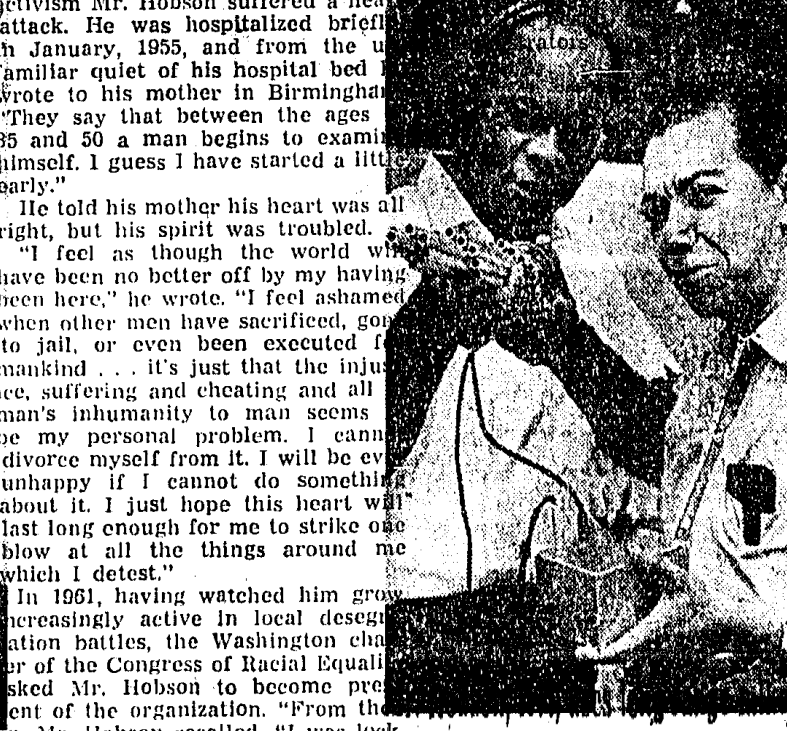
Julius Hobson Sr. and his wife in front of a school board. Hobson was a vocal advocate for public education and fought against school segregation. He was known for his fiery speeches and his willingness to risk his health and freedom for his cause.

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...by being out there. She had come and a little jingle they had made up about the racist and dealer.

They were arrested. Royal Motors hired a black salesman. "Hobson would never countenance any challenge or opposition," Cassell said. "Hobson was an Alabama boy. He'd had to put up with compromise for so long... his attitude did turn people off from time to time."

The national CORE leadership was growing increasingly irritated with Mr. Hobson, both as a tactician and as a CORE leader. In 1964, calling the Washington chapter a "dictatorship," CORE expelled him from the organization.

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 as 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 the 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, calling the suit, called Hobson vs. Hanson, then city school Supt. Carl Hansen, 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 that 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 faculty, specifying that students from overcrowded black schools should be bused to the undercapacity white schools west of Rock Creek Park. Threat by local blacks that the antiwar movement was racist. He was nominated by the People's Party to be vice president of the United States, as a candidate, Dr. Benjamin Spock.

He also found out he was dying. The pain began in early 1971, one friend remembered, a backache that sometimes made Mr. Hobson stoop when he stood up. That autumn he went to the doctor, saying he needed a back brace. When his wife came home that night he said there was something wrong with the blood cells in his bone marrow. "Don't worry," he told her. "It's not cancer." But it was. Mr. Hobson had multiple myeloma, a cancer that attacks the spine. Doctors said then, in 1971, that he could die in six months. "I had my crying time, you know," Mr. Hobson told The Washington Post in 1972. He struggled with the pain, with the morphine he took to ease it, with the unfamiliar dependence of illness. "I don't want to go on my knees," Mr. Hobson said. "I'd like to stand up."

In November, 1972, 2,000 people crowded into a room of the Sheraton Park Hotel to honor the man who had spent 20 years stirring up Washington. The audience were his family, his admirers, and many of the local Washington figures Mr. Hobson had fought for years. Hobson was so sick that he lay on a couch for most of the evening, but he still smoked a cigar. "My first wake," Mr. Hobson would later call that testimonial, because for long time afterward he beat back the disease. In 1974, after a campaign conducted mostly from his wheelchair, Mr. Hobson was elected as an at-large member of what he had often referred to as the "so-called City Council." He represented the Statehood Party, ridiculing what he said was the District's colonial status, promising that statehood would be his first goal.

He fixed her a steak with first goal. "I want you to know that my intentions in taking you out are perfect proper," 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 their engagement—on the night Hobson lost his bid for re-election to the school board.

"If there was anything he lost the 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



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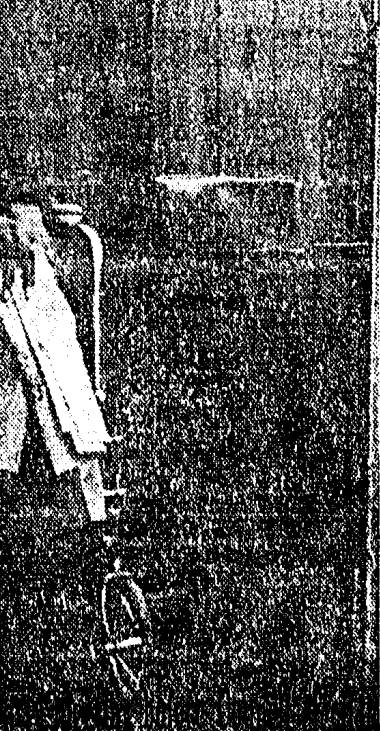


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"I will be ever unhappy if I cannot do something about it (inhumanity). I just hope this heart will last long enough for me to strike one blow at all the things around me which I detest."

referendum bill as they visited the George Washington Hospital outpatient clinic for a routine checkup. Tuesday evening in his apartment in Southwest, Hobson developed digestive problems. He spent the night at home. But by yesterday morning, he was so uncomfortable that Mrs. Hobson drove him back to the hospital.

He was admitted to the hospital about 10:30 a.m. with infections and internal bleeding. Two hours later, at



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