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Mary Drake: North Fulton's heart and soul Charitable work spanned four decades

April 13, 2006

Before the United Way had an office in Alpharetta, before North Fulton Community Charities was helping people in Roswell, people in need had one person to turn to here. Fortunately for them that person was Mary Drake.

Some say she was the heart and soul of North Fulton County, others say she was its conscience. Certainly she was the driving force behind organized charitable work above the Chattahoochee River starting when she was the one-woman office of the Economic Opportunity Office of Atlanta for North Fulton.

Ms. Drake died April 13, 2006, when at last that generous heart gave out. She was 83.

At her funeral April 18 at Roswell United Methodist Church, the Rev. Malone Dodson, now pastor emeritus at RUMC, recalled he had been in Roswell only about two weeks when he got a call from Ms. Drake. She wanted money.



by Hatcher Hurd
write the author



Mary Drake (click for larger version)

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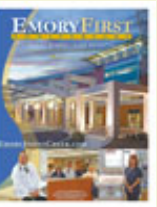
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The other ministers in Roswell could have told him to expect that, she was always calling the local churches for help with some one or some family in trouble. As head of the EOA in North Fulton for 22 years, Ms. Drake had no budget herself. But she was a magnet for people in need because she always found a way to help.

It was almost in self-defense that the church community helped found North Fulton Community Charities in 1983.

"Because all the ministers got tired of me and Frances McGahee coming around asking them for money every week," Drake said in a 2000 interview. "We would see a need, and I would go call somebody for some money. We didn't get turned down too many times."

So it began, people in North Fulton who were about to be evicted, those who had a medical emergency or those who simply needed food to feed their family that day had a place to go. North Fulton Community Charities' first director was Ms. Drake. She kept on doing what she had always done, but now she had a budget.

She was supposed to have retired somewhere along the line when Barbara Duffy was made executive director, but Ms. Drake was never far away. And that was just how Duffy liked it.

"Mary has been my friend and mentor from the beginning of my time as director of North Fulton Community Charities [1990]. She taught me about people. There is no one I know as compassionate and understanding of the families NFCC serves. She could accept each person with all warts and problems and develop trust," said Duffy. "She could emphasize without pity or judgment."

She would listen and quietly ask questions to identify and understand the problem. She would suggest alternatives, being careful not to make decisions for the individual, said Duffy.

"This approach to helping empowers someone who is struggling, and does not allow them to abdicate decision-making to someone else" Duffy said.

Ms. Drake always pointed back to one event in 1967 as the catalyst that energized her ever since.

"A little girl died in my arms of malnutrition. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't believe something like that could happen in America, here. How could I stop doing it," Drake said.

She never did.

She logged hundreds of miles a year taking the sick down to Grady Hospital until Grady finally



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opened a clinic in Roswell. She recalled the old station wagon the Red Cross kept on call, supplying the driver, to take the sick down to Grady Hospital.

"You had to go two or three times before they'd let you see a doctor," Drake said. "The closest DFACS [Department of Family and Children's Services] was in Buckhead. We just had no services up here."

Despite a heart attack, she slowed down only a little bit. She loved to travel and she loved to work in her garden. She loved to hop on her tractor and cut the grass. She called it her "therapy." But she was seldom far from NFCC offices on Grove Street.

Today, NFCC helps feed hungry people through its Food Pantry of donated foodstuffs. The Clothes Closet provides second-hand coats, clothes, shoes and more to those in need. People pay for services on a sliding scale based on their ability to pay.

NFCC also helps with emergency payments to keep the utilities on, emergency rent to prevent an eviction, MARTA cards to keep people working and medicine for the elderly.

Ms. Drake had planned to take a short trip to Tennessee before coming back to Roswell for the dedication of The Drake House, a shelter for homeless women and children that was named in her honor.

With typical humility, she said she "didn't know why they wanted to name it after me." But the people who have worked with the area's working poor and the needy know why.

Her long-time friend Frances McGahee remembered her in words that were often repeated at Ms. Drake's funeral.

"She was one of the kindest, most beautiful people I ever met," McGahee said. "She got me started helping. She would always say to me, 'Frances, this person needs help today.' And then off we'd go, to find a way to help them."

She always had her finger on where the greatest need was.

John Smith III, executive director of The Drake House, said she was an inspiration to everyone who met her.

"She was a quiet, humble person. In all of the 10 years I knew her, she never had a bad thing to say about anyone. She never wanted attention, she didn't want accolades. She just saw what needed to be done, and found a way to get it done," he said.

In the end, though, that is not her legacy, said the Rev. Dodson.

"She not only did what needed to be done. She inspired others to do the same," he said.

Ms. Drake is survived by her sister, Eleanor Drake of Roswell, a brother John and his wife Anne Drake of Fayetteville, two nieces and a nephew.

In lieu of flowers, her sister, Eleanor, has asked that donations be made to The Drake House, 11270 Elkins Road, Roswell 30076.



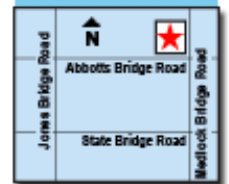
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