

THE VOICE



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A close-up portrait of Rowena Blackman-Stroud, a Black woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing a black blazer and gold hoop earrings. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

Rowena Blackman-Stroud

1950 - 2022

THE FIGHT TO FUND SUNY · MEMBER SPOTLIGHT · KUDOS FOR CONTINGENTS

A fighter with a heart

ROWENA BLACKMAN-STROUD

1950 - 2022

You didn't want to cross Rowena Blackman-Stroud, not when she was fighting to protect workers at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University.

And certainly not when she was fighting for her union.

"Rowena motivated me to act with determination like nobody else could," said UUP President Fred Kowal, who gave a remembrance of Blackman-Stroud at her Dec. 12 funeral in New York City. "She could do this because she asked from the heart. Rowena was one of the kindest, most caring people you'd ever be lucky enough to meet, but when she felt that action needed to be taken, she was bold, determined and tenacious. I turned to her for advice constantly. I will miss her deeply; she will be remembered and will inspire me for the rest of my life."

Whether it meant personally meeting with Brooklyn-area politicians—who knew and respected her—bringing busloads of Downstate members to advocate in Albany, or orchestrating rallies to save jobs at Downstate, Blackman-Stroud was always willing to push—and sometimes shove—to get

the result she wanted.

"She was someone who pushed me to be the best version of myself," said statewide Secretary-Treasurer Jeri O'Bryan-Losee. "She was someone who wouldn't settle for you to coast, and who saw things in me that I never saw in myself. I would not be where I am today without her, and I will strive to make her proud."

Blackman-Stroud died Dec. 3 after a brief illness.

A lifetime of union service

She joined UUP in 1982 and quickly became involved, serving in numerous leadership roles at the Downstate Chapter. She was elected chapter president in 1991 and held that post until she stepped down in 2022.

A statewide Executive Board member for eight years, Blackman-Stroud won her first term as statewide treasurer in 1994. She would serve for 23 years, retiring

in 2017. Under her guidance, UUP became a stable, financially strong organization. She was a member of NYSUT's Executive Board and the New York AFL-CIO's Executive Council. She also held leadership positions in the American Federation of Teachers.

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— UUP President Fred Kowal



Blackman-Stroud left an indelible impression on those with whom she interacted. She was unforgettable, carrying herself with a grace and a style that were unmistakable—and uniquely hers.

“I am devastated by the loss of Rowena,” said Downstate Chapter President Redetha Abrahams-Nichols. “She was my mentor and my friend, and she provided unconditional support in my development as a union leader. She always emphasized the importance of advocacy. She said the union bridges the members and community to provide equitable health care for Central Brooklyn.”

Blackman-Stroud could be impatient at times, but that impatience always stemmed from a sense of urgency and a grim determination to stand up for what was right—regardless of the opposition.

Standing up for what's right

In the early 2010s, when the state threatened to cut hundreds of jobs at SUNY Downstate as part of a plan to downsize and privatize the hospital, Blackman-Stroud took action. She rallied the community around the issue, assembling a Brooklyn coalition of faith-based leaders, politicians and others to support Downstate.

Blackman-Stroud organized more than two dozen lunchtime rallies to save jobs at Downstate, many of them on the steps of the hospital's Clarkson Avenue entrance. Letitia James, then New York City public advocate, spoke at her rallies, as did AFT President Randi Weingarten, New York AFL-CIO President Mario Cilento, NYSUT President Andy Pallotta, and state and local politicians.

And she made sure that the dozens of Downstate

members were always at the rallies, wearing matching red shirts emblazoned with the demand “Save Jobs at SUNY Downstate.”

Pandemic protections

Blackman-Stroud's actions also saved lives during the coronavirus pandemic. With her members forced to reuse masks, gloves and other personal protective gear due to severe shortages, Blackman-Stroud called on UUP, NYSUT and AFT for help.

Working with Kowal and UUP staffers, Blackman-Stroud helped secure thousands of surgical gowns, gloves and face masks for Downstate front-line workers. NYSUT and AFT sent masks, gloves and other gear. She also demanded—and got—mandatory COVID testing and priority vaccines for Downstate front-line medical staff.

In 2020, Blackman-Stroud was also one of the first—and loudest—voices in the state to demand retention pay bonuses for front-line workers at Downstate and SUNY's

other public teaching hospitals.

Her advocacy became an important legislative platform for UUP. In 2022, the state approved \$3,000 retention pay bonuses for eligible health care workers.

For nearly four decades, Blackman-Stroud embodied the compassionate, unrelenting spirit of unionism—and the spirit of UUP. She will be missed.

“Let us remember all that Rowena did for our union and for all of us, and pledge ourselves to carrying on this work,” Kowal said. “That's what she would want—and expect from each of us.”

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— Downstate Chapter President Redetha Abrahams-Nichols

A WARRIOR FOR JUSTICE

Editor's note: UUP President Fred Kowal delivered a remembrance of Rowena Blackman-Stroud at her funeral service, held Dec. 12 at Saint Bartholomew's Church in New York City. That text, which chronicles his decades-long friendship with Blackman-Stroud, is below.

To Terrance Stroud, to his sons, Tyler and Dalen, to his wife, Dalia, and to Fred Lee; To all of Rowena's family and friends...I begin by offering condolences on behalf of the 37,000 members of United University Professions. Your loss is our loss.

For those of us in UUP, Rowena was the rock upon which we could lean, the voice we heard more clearly than all others, and the comrade whose wisdom guided us through the most challenging of times. For Rowena, no fight was too small to take on or too unimportant to win. What drove her was an unrelenting commitment to justice, to the duty we all have to make the world a better place, while never losing sight of the need to protect the rights of every individual, whether those rights are the rights of workers, the rights of people of color, the rights of women or the rights of any UUP member who has been a victim of unjust treatment. She, like few I've ever known, lived the principle that an injury to one is an injury to all.

And when I say that she was a rock, I have a particular kind of rock in mind: Volcanic rock. Those of us fortunate enough to have worked extensively with her know exactly what I mean. She was a powerful force of nature. If you disagreed with her, you never won an argument: You survived. Like volcanic rock, she could overwhelm you, while at the same time molding the world around her to meet the needs of the moment to reach her goals. She worked with passion, with unmatched energy, with love for the struggle, and with a force of will that would not brook defeat.

She was intimidating. I confess: She could strike fear into my heart when she had that particular look in her eye and sound in her voice: We were not doing enough! The volcano was ready to erupt. Especially, when she announced, "This is the first I'm hearing of this issue." In those circumstances, it was best to duck for cover.

But she could inspire you in those moments, or sometimes enrage you to get done what needed to get done.

Yet, she could also be funny, caring, or overcome with emotion when discussing a situation faced by one of her members or by her beloved University Hospital at Downstate. Since her passing, I have seen how UUP members were impacted by Rowena. Countless email messages and personal conversations all contained a constant theme: Rowena showed an unwavering concern for and interest in them as individuals. And they all remember and treasure that caring.

Rowena first arrived at Downstate in 1979 in the nuclear medicine department. There, she did her work with the same commitment and drive that we saw for decades as a union leader. As a Black woman, she faced racism and sexism. But she never allowed those injustices to crush her determination to do her work as an equal to her colleagues. In 1991, she was elected to serve as Downstate Chapter president. There, she provided unparalleled leadership in the face of nearly constant efforts to privatize or close that institution, which was central to the health and well-being of the Central Brooklyn

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community, and the education of a diverse, highly skilled workforce of health care professionals.

When Rowena stepped down two months ago, she was the dean of chapter presidents and a constant voice of wisdom, guidance and strength for all of us in UUP's leadership. On that same day, she resigned as a member of the New York AFL-CIO's Executive Committee, a position she held for 18 years. But before she left, she made sure that another UUPer would take her place to advocate for our members and the betterment of workers everywhere. That member is me. Yes, I do feel her presence and her watchful eye.

As if being Downstate Chapter president wasn't enough, she became UUP's statewide treasurer in 1994, providing the leadership needed to put our union on stable financial footing. It was in this role that I first worked with her. She and I were part-time officers (I was statewide membership development officer) and we shared an office. It never ceased to amaze me how busy

Rowena Blackman-Stroud: A Remembrance

she was! I have no idea how she ever found time to do all she did because she was constantly on the phone speaking with Downstate Chapter leaders, the chapter treasurers she mentored so well, and always her members. The office also featured a steady supply of Talbots shopping bags. Rowena did like to shop, though she was incredibly conservative when it came to the union's resources. It's why UUP has had such a stellar financial record.

Case in point: She proposed and got delegates to approve the creation of a new statewide secretary-treasurer position in 2017—even though the new full-time job led her to step down as treasurer and decline to run for the new post. Why? Despite my efforts, she had no intention of leaving Brooklyn, a requirement for the new job.

Her finest hours—and the time when my respect and admiration for her grew to its highest—were during the 2012-2015 fight to save SUNY Downstate. In this struggle, I came to see a true warrior for justice who would not rest. Just a couple of weeks after I was elected in May 2013, she “invited” me to Downstate for a rally to save the hospital. I've never been more nervous as she called me to speak at the rally, which included American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, NYSUT officers and local ministers from the amazing coalition she created.

Only Ro could bring such a group together. That was her power. We all knew that when she called, it was not because she couldn't do the work alone, it was because she could do the work and our place was with her... always. The countless hours she put in with Brooklyn community, faith and labor leaders resulted in saving that institution, which serves so many in Central Brooklyn and beyond.

And she didn't particularly care that we were taking on Gov. Andrew Cuomo and his friends in the health care industry who wanted to see Downstate go away. She was perfectly willing to call out Cuomo before it was popular and easier to do so. She demanded that those of us who claim to be leaders of unions or community leaders—and every one of her members—understand that Downstate would not be lost. She is gone, but our

commitment remains: Downstate will survive and the work to build it up—which our sister was committed to more than anyone else—will continue.

Then there was COVID. During the worst days of the pandemic, her work was not to save a hospital, it was to save the lives of our members. Literally. When the pandemic hit Brooklyn and patients filled the hospital and bodies filled the morgue, Rowena kept me posted daily on the extent of the emergency. Our members were getting sick. They were dying. And it was because they had insufficient protective equipment. She worked with me and with our staff to find and purchase the surgical gowns, masks and other PPE that were so desperately needed.

But Ro being Ro, she didn't just press me for help. She also went to AFT President Weingarten and NYSUT President Andy Pallotta. Pretty soon, trucks filled with PPE arrived at Downstate and our members got what they needed. Rowena saved lives. There's no other way to say it.

That's a warrior for justice. That's a human with a heart that reaches the whole world she saw with compassion and a desire to help. Constant. Compassionate. Driven. Unrelenting. Loving. She was all of these, for UUP members from Buffalo to Brooklyn and everywhere in between.

I close with words from Madiba, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela: “I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter. I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after

climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.”

To you, my sister Rowena, on behalf of all your comrades in UUP, I say that your walk is now on another path. You will make your mark there as well. For us who remain, we must walk onward. And your spirit will be with us. For the work of justice will not wait. You have given your life in service to it. So must we all. So shall we all. Rest easy, my sister, my friend. And travel well on your journey. You have earned the Peace that I pray be granted unto you. Solidarity forever.



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You always knew when Rowena Blackman-Stroud was in the room.

Her kindness, her grace, her compassion and her dogged determination to speak truth to power—especially when it came to standing up for UUP members—could not be denied.

A number of chapters, including Alfred, Binghamton, Cortland, Empire State College, New Paltz, Potsdam and Stony Brook, all passed motions posthumously honoring Blackman-Stroud. Others expressed their condolences for her family and their loss.

And remembrances from leaders came flooding in once UUP President Fred Kowal announced news of Blackman-Stroud's death in a Dec. 4 email.



Rowena was the epitome of unionism and selfless service. I was always in awe of her endless energy, her compassion, and her quick-witted ways addressing any issues that came her way. Her smart thinking and perspective will be sorely missed.

— Idalia Torres,
UUP Executive Board member

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Rowena had a special dignity, a personal integrity and a sense of values that was expressed in everything she did, everything she said, and everything she believed in. She was at the forefront of (UUP's) struggles for racial equality, fair wages, better treatment of hospital workers, health inequities and many other numerous issues.

— Ezra Zubrow, retired
Executive Board member

Her impact was felt in every corner, with her legacy of love and action.

— Bill Tusang, Cobleskill
Chapter president

I remember back when I first met Rowena, **it was obvious how widely respected and valued her leadership was.** It was clear that everyone knew when she entered the room, and when she spoke everyone listened.

— Andrew Solar-Greco, Stony Brook Chapter President

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Rowena saved many careers.

Always providing support to her members, she was a giant in UUP. Tireless, fearless and patient, she did the work necessary and behind the scenes, she was there. Rowena consoled many souls in distress. She met with members and never gave up on them. Her words of comfort and willingness to mentor them led to the rise of her chapter.

— Rob Compton,
Oneonta Chapter president

We have lost a great leader and role model whose life's work will echo far into the future.

— Steve Hinkle,
Morrisville Chapter
president

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