

# Community Champion Lightfoot dies at 60

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by Staff Writer Lara Becker

Jefferson Avenue has lost its keeper.

Willie W. Lightfoot, the longtime activist for the neighborhood in southwest Rochester, died yesterday morning at his Lake Ontario summer home, after a battle with stomach cancer. He was 60.

Mr. Lightfoot was born in Huntsville, Ala., and moved here with his grandparents in 1954. He lived with them in the Jefferson Avenue neighborhood, which he continued to serve until weeks before his death.

He had been making plans for a new headquarters for the Southwest Area Neighborhood Association, using insurance money from the building that burned down last year.

"His body was very sick. But his mind was alert and giving instructions to the end. He was bestowing wisdom to the end," said Sally A. Steinwachs, Mr. Lightfoot's companion of 15 years. "He died holding hands in prayer with friends, family and colleagues."

His friends call him "Big Dog." He was a three-star athlete in high school, skilled in track and field, basketball and football. He said he used to spend the night on the football field before big games, communing with the grass so he wouldn't slip the next day.

"Me and the grass would talk all night about what we were going to do together," he said recently. "I had to have the advantage."

With his big frame and booming voice, Mr. Lightfoot was seldom without some advantage. He was a born leader, who quit his job as a Xerox Corp. machinist in the 1960s to become a local agitator in the civil rights movement and the vice president of Action for a Better Community, Inc.

Mr. Lightfoot opened the People's Club, a nightclub and gathering place in 1970; created what would become

the Southwest Area Neighborhood Association in 1976; and lobbied to have James Madison School of Excellence built on the site of the old Madison High School. Of all his accomplishments, Mr. Lightfoot had said, he was proudest of that one.

When Mr. Lightfoot took up the saxophone four years ago, he also founded the SWAN Community Band that included players from grammar school to retirement age.

Hanif Abdul Wahid, a member of Rochesterians Against Illegal Narcotics and a friend of Mr. Lightfoot for 30 years, called him a "social prophet."

"He was a legend in our neighborhood. He was a folklore," said Wahid. "He always reached out to the people of the community. That's how Willie knows some of everyone."

Mr. Lightfoot was also a fixture on the Democratic side of the County Legislature, from 1978 to 1980 and from 1987 until his death. He once stood on the top of his desk, microphone in hand, to address the legislature.

Fellow Democratic County Legislator William Benet, who worked with Mr. Lightfoot since 1977, called him a great friend and political ally.

"He was one of the most compassionate and caring people that I have ever known in politics," Benet said. "He was deeply committed to kids and to youth and to his community."

He said Mr. Lightfoot worked on legislation to help the poor, help the unemployed find work and establish youth programs. "We're going to miss him," Benet said.

Republican County Legislator John Ferlicca said that Mr. Lightfoot was a true grass-roots politician, who lobbied hard for his neighborhood. "Willie was larger than life," said Ferlicca. "Whether he was on the



*In 1968, Willie Lightfoot had begun making a name as an activist and as an official with the new Action for a Better Community*

football field, playing sax in his band or in the county legislative chambers."

Earlier this month, more than 600 people attended a banquet at which his friends and colleagues shared anecdotes about the man they called the "Keeper of Jefferson Avenue."

"That genuine outpouring of love and appreciation meant so much to him and sustained him in his last days," said Mayor William A. Johnson Jr., who ordered that the flag at City Hall be flown at half-staff. Flags at all county facilities will also be flown at half-staff.

Mr. Lightfoot is survived by his companion, Steinwachs; two brothers, Frederick Lightfoot of Rochester and Joe Louis Lightfoot of New Orleans; a son, Willie J. Lightfoot of Rochester; and a daughter, Shirah R. Pope of Richmond, Va.

A funeral will be held at the end of this week at Aenon Baptist Church, 175 Genesee Street.

"He will be missed," Steinwachs said. "He's probably blowing his horn up in heaven."