

Activist Velma Hopkins, 86, dies

Community leader praised for lifetime of involvement, caring

By Leigh A. Dyer
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One day in 1944, Velma B. Hopkins threw a switch that cut off the power to all of the machines in her plant at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. She helped begin a strike that protested the low pay, exhausting hours and deplorable working conditions that left employees choking in clouds of tobacco dust.

That act led to a lifetime of community involvement that ranged from escorting the first black student to class at Reynolds High School to urging most of the city's black leaders to run for political office.

The five-decade tradition of civil-rights

activism ended Tuesday, when Hopkins died at her Highland Avenue home surrounded by family members.

She was 86.

Hopkins has left behind a generation of people who will remember her trademark red leather hat, the blue van she always drove around the city and her outspoken style when confronting those she disagreed with.

"She really leaves a legacy, because Mrs. Hopkins, if there was something happening in the community, she was there," said Earline Parmon, a county commissioner.

Parmon said that Hopkins and her hus-

band, Robert, gave her ice-cream cones when she was a small girl.

Parmon has called the Hopkinses "Momma" and "Poppa" for 40 years, she said.

Parmon and her colleague Mazie Woodruff credit Hopkins with motivating them to become county commissioners. They are two of many community leaders who say that Hopkins inspired them to be-



VELMA HOPKINS

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JOURNAL PHOTO

In 1983, Velma Hopkins could be found doing something natural: telling commissioners not to close Reynolds Memorial Hospital.

HOPKINS

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come involved in public life — although Hopkins never ran for office herself.

"She didn't ever want to be a ballplayer. She wanted to see that the ballplayers threw the balls right," Parmon said.

Woodruff, who met Hopkins at age 19 while working with her at Reynolds, said she thinks of Hopkins as a sister. Reynolds employees owe most of their current favorable working conditions to her legacy, Woodruff said.

"She did some beautiful things, some wonderful things that helped not just Velma, not just the black community, but the entire city and Forsyth County," Woodruff said.

Hopkins was a leader in Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agriculture and Allied Workers Union in the 1940s. During that time, friends say she endured the racism and sexism that any woman who tried to be a leader encountered. She, along with many other union organizers, was branded a communist and received death threats.

IN HER LATER public life, she was president of a group called Concerned Women for Justice and served on the Forsyth County Zoning Board of Adjustment. She also operated free-lunch programs for children and old people and served on a variety of community boards and commissions. Among other issues, she campaigned against the closing of Reynolds Memorial Hospital, the death penalty and conditions at Women's Prison in Raleigh.

Hopkins hosted a fund-raiser for Alderman Joycelyn Johnson in 1993. "It leaves a void . . . and a lesson that a lot of young people have not yet heard — the story of Velma Hopkins," Johnson said. "You had to sit down and listen to

her talk to understand who she was and why she felt so committed to being involved in politics."

HOPKINS WAS A longtime director of the cafeteria at Reynolds Health Center, where she was responsible for getting the vivid seasonal murals painted on the walls. She also founded a child-care center, Exodus Enrichment Center.

She raised eight foster children, many of whom were by her side during her final hours.

Hopkins' daughter, Denise Taylor, said she once asked her mother why she never ran for office. "She didn't want to be in anyone's pocket. She wanted to be able to speak her mind freely and say what she wanted to people," Taylor said.

"My momma played an important part in the life of everyone that she came in contact with," she said.

Robert Hopkins said yesterday that he met his wife at the former Lafayette movie theater, and married her in 1931 after 2½ years of courting.

Hopkins, 92, still works at Paul Myers catering service and said he plans to keep doing so as long as he can.

He said he admired his wife's political activism from a distance.

"I never lost any sleep over politics. . . . I worked, and I felt like that was enough for me," he said. "Whatever she was doing was all right with me. I didn't interfere with her."

"We had a happy life together, and that was the most important thing."

■ Hopkins is survived by her husband; a sister, Jessie Lanningham; six daughters and nine grandchildren. Family members will receive friends from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. today at Shiloh Baptist Church, and the funeral service will be at the church at 2 p.m. on Saturday, with interment to follow in Evergreen Cemetery.