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# Memories of Dr. Miriam R.G. Braverman (1920-2002)

By Andrew P. Jackson (Sekou Molefi Baako)

Queens Library's Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center staff and members of the Board of Directors, and Library Action Committee of Corona-East Elmhurst, Inc. were fortunate to have met and known Dr. Miriam R. G. Braverman. Our sentiments stem from her personal, professional and humanitarian friendship with Dr. E.J. Josey (1929-2009), Chief, New York State Department of Education's Bureau of Specialist Library Services during the late 20th Century. I would classify both of them as "activist librarians" (library professionals who struggled for equality within the profession and for equal access to library services in the community), in every sense of the phrase. They actively advocated for librarianship and agitated for equality within the library profession and for equity of programs and services for all communities and for library users.

The Langston board and staff were first introduced to Dr. Braverman in 1983. She and her colleagues gathered in New York City to fundraise and host receptions for Dr. E.J. Josey, candidate for President of the American Library Association. One reception was held at the home of Ms. Vivian Hewitt, and the other was held one fall Sunday afternoon at the Langston Hughes Library Center. Experiencing this gathering of politically active librarians was my first taste of librarianship in action. The room was filled with an electricity and energy

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galvanized for the mighty fight to have Dr. Josey elected as the first African American male to serve as President of the American Library Association.

As I listened to speeches by supporters and colleagues, including Hon. Major Owens (1936-2013), the first and only librarian to serve in the United States Congress (1983-2007), I knew these historical events and interactions would have a lasting impact on my library career. I learned that librarianship was so much more than just being a librarian or working at the library. It was being part of the struggle for equity of opportunity within the profession and fighting for ethnically diverse and marginalized communities to have equal opportunities for programs and services to meet their needs and nourish the future. I had known Major from our former lives, me a personnel services specialist in the Human Resources Department for the Human Resources Administration, and Owens in his position as Commissioner of the NYC Community Development Agency. My first time hearing Congressman Owens speak in his elected capacity and as a librarian helped me realize a different understanding and value of librarianship on a broader level as we in the profession inherited a responsibility to bring about change and improve our chosen profession, libraries and how they serve communities in need across the United States.

During his December 2006 speech, Congressman Owens paid tribute to Dr. Braverman on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. He referred to Miriam as a “Great Point-of-Light for all Americans... a great humanitarian as well as a Librarian..., who understood that the power of information was continually escalating... as an advocate in the classroom and a fighter on the street.” Indeed, those who knew her would agree she was, is and remains an etched memory of all of that and so much more than words can convey. In my mind’s eye, I first see Miriam, petite, with a warm inviting smile, eyes that sparkle. Her salt and pepper hair cut short, with a soft voice. I remember how eloquently she spoke and thinking I could listen to her forever and wished I was one of her student scholars in the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at New York University, before it closed. I also teach library science students at the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies and strive to prepare, encourage and impact these students as did Dr. Braverman.

The relationship between Miriam and the Langston Hughes board and staff deepened in 1984, as the result of a called meeting by the NYS Board of Regents with Queens Library’s Board of Trustees and its Director, Constance B. Cooke, and the Library Action Committee’s Board of Directors and me as its director. This meeting was held to explain the impending change in federal Library Services and Construction (LSCA) Act Title 1 funding channeled through the NYS Education Department that would impact annual grants earmarked for Langston Hughes through Queens Library. Mr. Shubert, Assistant Director at the NYS Board of Regents asked the question, “What will be the future of the

Langston Hughes Library?” With that, Mr. Shubert presented Queens Library a check for \$5,000 to hire a consultant to review and submit a report analyzing the operations, funding and programs and services of the Langston Hughes Community Library, and offer any necessary recommendations. The person recommended for this task was, Dr. Miriam Braverman.

Dr. Braverman met and interviewed LAC Board and members, Langston Hughes staff and local community residents. She examined the daily operations, the budgeting process and reviewed wide variety of programs and services offered. She compared these facets to the file of annual Library Services and Construction Act, Title 1 (LSCA) grant applications and final reports submitted. Upon completion of her extensive assessment, Dr. Braverman concluded:

a) Over the fifteen year history of the library (1969-1984), the Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center had surpassed the goals set in the original 1968 application, to create a center that provided circulating materials on The Black Experience for Queens County as an experimental federally funded special project of Queens Library. The library was named for famed Harlem poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967) as a tribute to his vast literary contributions to the field of Black Literature for four decades. Hughes wrote more than 860 poems and his works were translated in 60 different languages. The collection is housed *The Black Heritage Reference Center of Queens County*, a comprehensive circulating Black Heritage collection accessible to the Queens community at large. At the time of this review, approximately 20,000 volumes of print and non-print materials on The Black Experience were available. Today, this collection boasts over 45,000 volumes of on Black Experience titles, databases, microfilm and microfiche collections, over 1,500 copies of theses and dissertation on Black Literature and over 2,000 DVD and VHS videos, as well as other non-print materials, and an art collection valued at over \$250,000.

b) In addition to library services and the Black Heritage Center, the library offered a Cultural Arts Program (CAP) with musical performances, literary workshops and presentations, film screenings and discussions, cultural workshops, history lectures and panels, a variety of workshops including a theatre arts and dance workshop. These services were funded by grants from the NYS Council on the Arts, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, Queens Borough Presidents Office.

The after school Homework Assistance Program (HAP) provided tutorial services and skills development in reading, writing and language art skills for 1st through 7th graders throughout the school year and six weeks in the summer. A supplemental grant from the NYS Education Department provides a 4-6 week Math and Language Arts Clinic to enhance students math, reading and language arts skills.

- c) The storefront library space, a 12,800 sq. ft. two building at 102-09 Northern Boulevard, was inadequate to accommodate the programs and services offered.
- d) Queens Library's operating budget and staffing for Langston Hughes were inadequate for insufficient for the extensive programs and services offered to the community-at-large.

As a result of Dr. Braverman's report, QL and LAC, the subsequent two years were spent negotiating a formal Letter of Agreement, signed in October 1987 that resulted in the construction of a new, two story 24,000 sq. ft. library center at 100-01 Northern Boulevard and an increase in operating budget and some additional staff. Credit is always given to Dr. Braverman for her passion for this library and her report to NYSED, and her vision for this community based library. She understood the unique relationship between Queens Library, a large metropolitan library system, and the Library Action Committee, a local community based non-profit organization. She respected the historical significance that local residents conceived of and founded the Langston Hughes Community Library under the auspices of Queens Library, and wanted it to grow to its full potential to better serve the residents of the Corona-East Elmhurst and Queens County.

My last memory of seeing Miriam was at the grand opening of our new library building on November 9, 1999. It was a warm and sunny day for November, as was the big smile on her face. She was so excited to see how far we had come since 1969. Dr. Braverman participated in the two block opening day procession from 102nd to 100th Street and had a front row seat at the opening ceremony and festivities. She was mentioned several times by different speakers. Each time she graciously blushed and said "Thank you, so much". When she toured the building, she shook her head with admiration, smiled and complimented us on the beauty of the design. Dr. Braverman was so happy that her role as consultant and the report she submitted played a role in the growth of the library to this beautiful new setting.

The LAC Board and Langston Hughes staff are so appreciative of Dr. Braverman's work and passion for the library services to the Corona-East Elmhurst community and to Queens County. To this day, when Miriam Braverman's name is mentioned, a smile comes to both staff and board members at the memories we have of this beautiful person. She was a remarkable librarian, dedication to our profession. Her life is a wonderful example for future librarians. She lives on in our hearts and minds, and as long as Langton Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center lives, so does her spirit within us as inspiration for greater things to come.