

Community bids farewell to tireless volunteer

By Willis Brown
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EAST PALO ALTO — In reverence and love, in mourning and grief — and in awed silence — the people of East Palo Alto and Menlo Park Friday said goodbye to Onetta Mae Harris.

Harris, a seemingly tireless volunteer in service to the east-of-Bayshore Freeway community for more than 25 years, died April 2 of cancer. She was 57 years old.

Harris was one of the most respected members of the community. She was instrumental in the founding of both the Belle Haven Community Center and the Charles Drew Medical-Dental Center.

She was described by friends as a warm and loving servant of the young and old.

More than 500 persons attended a memorial service in Harris' honor held Friday afternoon at the St. John Baptist Church. Among those attending were East Palo Alto Mayor Barbara Mouton and Municipal Council members Gertrude Wilks, Berkley Driessel and Bradford Stamper; Menlo Park Mayor Peg Gunn and City

Councilmen Billy Roy White and Douglas Dupen; Menlo Park police chief Gerald McNamara and police officers Paul Lucia and Vickie Saucedo; Charles Drew Medical Dental Center director Charles Range and Ravenswood City School District board president Cecil Reeves and board member Mavis Knox.

Harris was eulogized by longtime friend Dr. Warren Hayman. Hayman, once principal of Belle Haven Elementary School, now is vice president of Morgan State University in Baltimore, Md.

The Rev. Henry Milton officiated.

"She stood for freedom, for justice, for equality and for a different Belle Haven, a different East Palo Alto, a different Nairobi, a different world — a world where men and women forget to hate and stand as one — a community family," Hayman said of Harris.

Harris, for years a resident of the Belle Haven neighborhood of Menlo Park, served on the Belle Haven Advisory Board and Committee, which recommended the creation of the Belle Haven Community Center.

She also was chairman of the Neighborhood Housing Service, a housing rehabilitation agency. In addition, she worked with young people as an assistant to the principal at Belle Haven Elementary School.

She was instrumental in the creation of East Palo Alto's only health service center, the Charles Drew Medical-Dental Center. She served on the Drew board of directors and worked there as a patient advocate.

"Her name is high on our scroll of honor and imbedded deep in our hearts and the hearts of many. She has blazed a trail for others. In the simple line of duty and, with that warm expression and smile, she has served this community and the young people she loved," Hayman said.

"In life we love you still. And in our hearts you will always hold a place that no one else can fill," he said.

Councilwoman Wilks called Harris "a strong, strong sister."

"If she could speak," Wilks said, "she would

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tell you young people to lift up your heads and to live as though your life would make a difference."

Mayor Mouton presented the Harris family with a proclamation from the East Palo Alto Municipal Council, in memory of her service to the community. She called the service "a beautiful home-going."

Harris was born to Joe and Winnie Dixon in Sherman, Texas. She spent her youth in Rosebud, Texas, and graduated from Rosebud's Wilson White High School.

Harris attended Texas College in Tyler, Texas, where she met and married Israel Harris. They later were divorced.

Mrs. Harris also attended Paul Quinn College in Waco, Texas, and Antioch College in San Francisco.

Harris is survived by her eight children, Gwendolyn, Israel, Kenneth, Edmund, Frederick, Terence, Andre and Felicia, five grandchildren and numerous other relatives.

Following the service, she was interred at Alta Mesa Memorial Park in Palo Alto.