

Winston-Salem Journal Article  
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**Winston-Salem mourns an icon. Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin made a lasting impression on city's arts, educational landscape.**

Fran Daniel , John Hinton

Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, the chairwoman of the board of the N.C. Black Repertory Company and the executive producer of the National Black Theatre Festival, died Monday. She was 76.

Sprinkle-Hamlin stepped into her leadership roles within the N.C. Black Repertory Company immediately following the 2007 death of her husband, Larry Leon Hamlin. He founded the company and produced its first festival in 1989.

Nigel Alston, the executive director of the N.C. Black Repertory Company, said that Sprinkle-Hamlin will be remembered for continuing her husband's vision for the National Black Theatre Festival.

"After Larry died in 2007, people wondered if it would continue or not," Alston said. "It has thrived since 2007.

The festival, with its theme of "An International Celebration and Reunion of Spirit," showcases top Black theater companies from across the United States and abroad.

The six-day event attracts nearly 65,000 people every two years to Winston-Salem. The 2019 festival was the largest event in the company's history, generating more than \$10 million for the Piedmont Triad economy, the NBTF said at that time.

Sprinkle-Hamlin and other company officials were disappointed when the 2021 NBTF was postponed until August 2022 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Alston said.

Sprinkle-Hamlin and other organizers had been planning for this year's festival, which is scheduled for Aug. 1-6, since last year, Alston said.

The festival's organizers will stage a special event to honor Sprinkle-Hamlin at this year's NBTF, Alston said.

"Definitely, there will be something," Alston said. "What that will be is too early to tell."

Sprinkle-Hamlin's family declined to reveal her cause of death.

"We can't describe the pain and loss we are feeling right now with Sylvia's passing," Sprinkle-Hamlin's family said. "We are grateful for the outpouring of love from the local community and the Arts community from around the country and the world."

Chase Law, the president and chief executive of the Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, also issued a statement Tuesday about Sprinkle-Hamlin.

"We were saddened to learn of the passing of Mrs. Sylvia Hamlin, an icon within the Winston-Salem arts and cultural sector," Law said. "It's a huge loss for our entire community.

“As a visionary, she and her husband, Larry, created something that has had and continues to have an impact on theatre both locally and nationally,” Law said. “(The) Arts Council will continue to help keep her legacy alive. She will be missed.”

Sprinkle-Hamlin retired in December 2019 after a 40-year career with the Forsyth County Public Library system. When she was named director in 2000, Sprinkle-Hamlin became the first African American and the first woman to head the county library system.

Sprinkle-Hamlin oversaw the library’s transformation to the digital age, where people are as likely to download materials as to check out books.

She was among the county leaders who supervised the two-year, \$28 million rebuilding of the Central Library on West Fifth Street in Winston-Salem.

Forsyth County Manager Dudley Watts said the Central Library project, which was completed in 2017, was a source of personal pride for Sprinkle-Hamlin.

“The colorful building with lots of light and creative spaces is a reflection of her personality.” Watts said. “She was the epicenter of creative partnerships and reached in to all communities through their branches to meet patron’s needs.

“She was funny and demanding at the same time. My best memories of her where when we disagreed on something and somehow found a way to laugh hysterically about it,” Watts said.

Damon Sanders-Pratt, deputy Forsyth County manager, said he worked directly with Sprinkle-Hamlin in her role as library director for more than 15 years.

“When Sylvia assumed the director’s role, she replaced a well-regarded leader in the North Carolina library profession, a daunting task,” Sanders-Pratt said. “Sylvia not only maintained the momentum of the library system, but as (the) library director, she and her team guided the system to new levels in service, technology and facilities.

“Sylvia led one of county government’s most popular services, (and) was a champion of diversity, and a favorite daughter in the Forsyth County community,” Sanders-Pratt said. “Her accomplishments and recognitions as a librarian and arts icon were substantial.”

Sprinkle-Hamlin received a bachelor’s degree in education from Winston-Salem State University and a master’s degree in library science from Clark Atlanta University.

She began her career as a children’s librarian at the Free Library of Philadelphia. From there, she accepted a position as an information specialist at the Benjamin Banneker Urban Center and then as an instructional media center director for the Philadelphia Public Schools.

In 1977, she returned home to Winston-Salem, where she worked as the assistant director and public service librarian at Winston-Salem State University. She also owned and operated a small business, Fashion Two-Twenty Cosmetics.

“Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin leaves behind an incredible legacy as a respected national leader in championing both of her dual passions, as a librarian and an advocate of the arts,” said Mark Owens, the president and chief executive of the Greater Winston-Salem Inc. “Our community is a better place because of her dedication to the National Black Theatre Festival and the N.C. Black Repertory Company as well as the many local organizations where she volunteered her time over many years.

“Her impact in Winston-Salem will be lasting, and her memory will be treasured,” Owens said.

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