



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
TREASURER SHAWN T. WOODEN

PRESS RELEASE

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**REMARKS BY TREASURER WOODEN FOR
MAYOR CARRIE SAXON PERRY'S CELEBRATION OF LIFE**

The Artist Collective - Hartford, Connecticut

HARTFORD, CT – Today, State Treasurer Shawn T. Wooden offered the following remarks at the celebration of life for former Hartford Mayor Carrie Saxon Perry:

Scripture tells us “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble generously.” In her public life, and in her humble death, Mayor Perry carried the generous grace of God till the very end. A public servant in the truest sense of the word, she lived humbly, but boldly in service to others.

Mayor Perry never wanted a fuss or fanfare; no memorials or monuments in her honor. In fact, this celebration is not something that she wanted and because of that, I confess that I was conflicted in participating. However, it became clear to me, and others, that we - the community - need this. We need our own healing over her loss. We need to ensure that Mayor Perry’s powerful legacy be appropriately remembered for posterity. Because the hefty weight of carrying her legacy forward is on us and simply put, we haven’t lived up to that responsibility as fully and fittingly as she deserved, so tonight we recommit ourselves to changing that.

This evening is not about our community losing a giant. It’s about recognizing the fact that a giant emerged from this community; lived her life in service to this community; and that she will forever be remembered by this community.

So Mayor, I hope you’ll forgive us, but you’ve earned this celebration and much more.

Because yes, Mayor Perry was the first - the first Black woman to be elected Mayor of the City of Hartford, the first in the State of Connecticut and the first of a major city in the Northeast. But the Mayor’s legacy isn’t just about the barriers she broke, but the bridges she built. And let me tell you, she fought tooth and nail to build them.

Mayor Perry’s credo was “fight the good fight.” It’s a principle that guided her entire life and propelled many of us into politics as well.

It’s something she learned coming up in Bellevue Square, when the neighborhood called her Moonie. Raised by strong Black women with high expectations, the Mayor would recall them saying, “When you fall down, you get right up. If you fall down, again. Get up, again, and don’t be ashamed of falling down.”

It was that unrelenting fearlessness to “fight the good fight” that made her such a formidable leader. Because win, lose, or draw – Mayor Perry was going to be in it. If she failed, she’d get back up and try again. No matter how many falls, she was determined to pushback against an unequal system, a broken system. And she made us believe we had the power to do it too.

To the Mayor, power was a tool of influence - it could be used to maintain the status quo or to change it. And she was aimed to tap into everyone's collective power to change it.

I interned for the Mayor while I was a student at Trinity College and my first job out of college was working on Mayor Perry's 1991 re-election campaign. It's hard to forget, but for those who don't remember Hartford politics leading up to the 1991 election, let me give you some context.

Well, first you have to know – Mayor Carrie Saxon Perry did not suffer fools, fakes or idleness well. And after two terms in the Mayor's Office and little movement by the City Council to advance key priorities on issues from healthcare to a police civilian review board, Carrie Saxon Perry was one frustrated Mayor.

At the time, Hartford's weak-mayor-strong-city-council form of government was a particular point of contention. It represented inaction and the imbalance of power, and Mayor Perry was having none of it. Changing the way Hartford was governed, meant changing the City's Charter. And changing the City's Charter required changing the people elected to the Council. And changing the City Council required bucking the Democratic establishment. Just the type of "good fight" Mayor Perry was ready for.

See the '91 election came on the heels of the census, which revealed for the first time Hartford's population was a 1/3rd African American, a 1/3rd White, and a 1/3rd Hispanic. So to shift the scales of power and redistribute equity on the Council, the Mayor not only ran for her own re-election campaign, but she drafted a slate of political newcomers - two Black, two White, and for the first time in our city's history, two Puerto Rican candidates – to run on her Democratic unity ticket. In a clean sweep, the Mayor ushered in a new City Council majority and ousted the incumbents in a 2-to-1 margin.

She never had the money that could buy the political power and influence that fueled the party machine, but she had the people. Mayor Perry always had the people.

She was grassroots. A community organizer years before Barack Obama was born and decades before he made it popular.

Mayor Perry was just years ahead of her time. Back then, critics liked to tag her as a radical because she believed in certain progressive ideals, issues like the decriminalization of drugs or universal healthcare—you know, things the insurance capital of the world really embraced.

One of my fondest memories, which really does make me smile was during the 1992 Presidential campaign, when then-Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton was vying for endorsements in Connecticut. Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts had dropped out and the choice was down to Clinton or former California Governor Jerry Brown. While the media and party faithful had anointed Bill Clinton the frontrunner, Mayor Perry wasn't convinced. She had big concerns about him, including his support for the death penalty. So, when she was invited to meet with Governor Clinton at Mount Olive Baptist Church, naturally, she passed and sent this kid - I was in my early 20s at the time.

Later, the Mayor asked me to tag along with her to the Congress Street Rotisserie diner to meet Jerry Brown. No press, no nonsense – just the candidate sitting down with the Mayor. They talked about some issues and then Brown asked the Mayor what she wanted; what would help shore up support for him. He even asked if she wanted to be his Secretary of State. The Mayor just shrugged it off with a smile.

Now in all honesty, I'll admit Jerry Brown was a bit different. But as a Democratic candidate for the nomination, he was challenging the status quo. He was forcing a dialogue within the party and that was something the Mayor could definitely get behind because the political bosses in dark smoke filled rooms don't decide the candidates, the people do.

In the end, Mayor Perry went out on a ledge alone as the only elected official in Connecticut to endorse Brown for the Democratic nomination and worked for his victory. And, as it turns out, Brown defied the odds and actually beat Clinton in Connecticut. For Perry, I think she knew he wouldn't be President, but, I know she saw it as "fighting the good fight" by standing with him in challenging the status quo.

What's truly barrier breaking about Mayor Perry was her ability to be comfortable with her choices on the issues, even if they weren't popular at the time. Former Congressman Charlie Rangel of New York called it her "political courage."

She was a maverick; unbought and unbossed; simply uninterested in playing politics as usual at a table that had no seats for women of color, especially a fiercely independent woman like herself. So she got to work. Built her own table. Brought her own chairs. And propped the door open. Welcomed anyone to walk in and sit down, there was always room at her table.

Before I close, I have to share a story about one New Year's Eve at City Hall. I was itching to get out of the office to start my night when a man came into the office. Now, you have to understand, this man was the only thing that stood between me and the evening celebrations. To my chagrin, I remember the Mayor warmly welcoming him into the office. It was brutally cold that night, and this gentleman had no shelter, nowhere to go, so naturally he came to the Mayor's Office. I remember Mayor Perry picking up the phone, calling all around, well past the time people would pick up their phones on New Year's Eve, trying to find him a safe place to go for the night. And it struck me then as much as it does now – this gentleman, in obvious need didn't go to the Governor's Office or his State Rep, he didn't seek out his Senators or Congressman. He turned to the Mayor for help. Because he knew she would. That's what she did.

To her, public service meant serving the public first, and always.

To her, connections were important. She'd always reach out and touch your arm in conversations and naturally knew how to use laughter as a tool to put people at ease. The Mayor often made jokes about serious topics, she'd call it "crackin' but fackin'."

Simply put, Mayor Carrie Saxon Perry was a giant. A Civil Rights' icon. Authentically Hartford. Loyal. She gave herself so generously to this City and to those of us that were fortunate enough to be part of her life. I have to admit, learning of her loss hit me hard because giants like Mayor Perry are supposed to be immortal. Forever giving us shoulders to stand on and deep footprints to follow. So her homegoing was a wake-up call, a call to action, and a reminder that it's on us.

It's on us to teach not just our children, but generations of children about the life and works of Mayor Carrie Saxon Perry.

It's on us to "fight the good fight"; to bring greater equity not just to Hartford, but anywhere where the scales of power are off balance and the gulf between the haves and have-nots is too wide.

It's on us to humbly follow the Mayor's example.

It's on us to be of selfless service to all of our sisters and brothers, regardless of their color, gender, religion, who they love or where they come from.

It's on us.

God bless you, and in the words of Mayor Perry, have a "mellow day."

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