The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

December 13, 2006 Wednesday
Main Edition

SECTION: METRO NEWS, Pg. 1D

LENGTH: 695 words

HEADLINE: RUTH LYONS CLARKE WHITE: 1921-2006: Mayor's most important role model

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BODY:

Ruth Lyons Clarke White loved politics, books, the church and her friends, and she passed on her passion for knowledge and people to her only child, the girl who would grow up to be Atlanta's first female mayor.

Two years ago, when Mayor Shirley Clarke Franklin visited a classroom of girls at Jean Childs Young Middle School, she told them that she "hung around my mom all of the time" as a youngster. She also said her mother was her "foundation," her most important role model.

Franklin's mother died Tuesday at Emory Healthcare in Atlanta. She was 85 years old.

White had undergone dialysis recently, according to her friend, the Rev. Sadie Mitchell of St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. The cause of death is unknown. Funeral arrangements are pending.

Friends say White, the mother of the woman regarded as one of the top mayors in the country, was an inspiration to her daughter.

"She was very interested in politics --- international, national and local," Mitchell recalled, adding that White often talked and read about politics.

"She was very dedicated to church," Mitchell said. "She was a strong believer and attended regularly. She also had her child enrolled in Sunday School."

In 2002, she held the Bible while her daughter was sworn in as Atlanta's first woman mayor. Four years later, she attended the ceremony when Franklin was honored with the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation's Profile in Courage Award.

Born in Asheville, N.C., Mrs. White grew up in Washington. After graduating from Miner Teachers College in Washington, she moved as a bride to Philadelphia, where she reared her only child.
White was a teacher and reading specialist in the D.C. public schools. Franklin also taught school, at Talladega College in Alabama.

"She was known as a great, knowledgeable talker, not just a run-off-the-mouth type but a knowledgeable talker," Mitchell said.

Longtime friend Helen Briscoe Hyde, 87, of Philadelphia recalled White's outspokenness.

"Speaks her mind in a minute, like Miss Shirley," Hyde said. "I guess that's where [the mayor] gets her feistiness."

In an August 2005 newspaper article, Franklin's mother said her daughter was also clever enough to get her way. When a teenage Shirley wanted to attend summer school, her mother refused, thinking it would be a "club" atmosphere with more play than work.

But Shirley made her own plans. She was accustomed to getting good grades in French, but earned a "D" that year, White recalled. The poor performance, which White suspected was intentional, meant Shirley had to attend summer school.

"She figured out a way to get her way," White said in the article.

White was a longtime member of St. Thomas Episcopal Church and was a member of the Sisterhood Guild and the Episcopal Church Women, Mitchell said. She also belonged to the Stork Club, a group for new mothers, the Links and the Smart Set, social organizations with civic interests.

In the mid-1950s, White made a difficult, life-altering decision to divorce Shirley's father, Judge Eugene Clarke.

After years of watching her husband's steady decline into alcoholism, she sent her daughter to visit family in Washington. When she returned, her mother had separated from her father. He eventually became homeless.

"She always told Shirley, 'That is your father, and no matter what he does, you love him.' I know she did that," Mitchell said.

As an adult, Franklin has spoken publicly about her father's descent into alcoholism. She has said her mother was the anchor of her life during that turbulent time. As a mayor, she said she felt compassion for homeless people because of that experience.

Franklin's parents divorced when the future mayor was 10 years old. In 1964, Ruth Lyons Clarke married Carey Daniel White. He died in December 2000. About two years ago, White moved to Atlanta to live with her daughter.

In addition to the mayor, White is survived by two sisters, Edna Rodgers and Mildred Veney, three grandchildren, several nieces and other family members.

In lieu of flowers, the family has asked that donations be made in her name to the Howard University School of Education, Office of the Dean, 2441 Fourth St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20059.

GRAPHIC: Photo: StaffRuth White (left), mother of Mayor Shirley Franklin, at her daughter's swearing-in in January 2002. /ImageData* ImageData*
Photo: TY TAGAMI / StaffRuth White "speaks her mind in a minute, like Miss Shirley," a friend said. White died Tuesday./ImageData*

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