



## Mary Early Hardison

October 11, 1930 - June 26, 2017

Mary Laws Early Hardison of Tallahassee, Florida passed away peacefully June 26th at the age of 86 after a courageous 35-year battle with chronic facial pain.

Mary was preceded in death by her parents Irvine B. and Evelyn Elise Early of Jacksonville, Florida; her devoted husband of 39 years The Reverend Cannon James (Jim) Arthur Hardison, Jr.; and her brother, Irvine Baxter Early, Jr. An active member of Riverside Park United Methodist Church throughout her entire youth, her minister suggested she attend Duke University where she met Jim. Integrating the Duke Chapel with students from nearby North Carolina Central University would become the first of many acts together for a couple who would be later deemed “the dynamic duo” by the Tallahassee Democrat in July 1989. After their graduation and marriage in 1952, they set off to Dallas, TX where Jim attended seminary and she started her professional career working with the American Friends Service Committee. Mary successfully lobbied the city’s corporate leaders to integrate their workforces, inaugurating her individual gentle but firm advocacy skills to affect social change.

In 1956 Mary and Jim moved to Maryland and together they started Christ Methodist Church in Landover Hills. They also started a family with the birth of son Paul and daughter Carol. Mary’s interest in public policy advocacy deepened as they made regular family visits to nearby Washington, D.C. In 1960 they moved to Jacksonville, FL and felt a calling to the Episcopal Church

where Jim was ordained and became Associate Rector of All Saints Episcopal Church. A call to become Rector at Holy Comforter Episcopal Church moved the family to Tallahassee and brought the birth of daughter Ann. Mary worked with congregants and community leaders to establish services that would provide food and gently-used clothes for families in need. Active in the campaign of former governor Leroy Collins, her children regularly joined her in driving people to the polls or to meetings with local elected officials.

In 1970 Jim made a mid-life career change to become a full-time advocate for fair and affordable housing with the Florida Division of Family Services, necessitating a move back to Jacksonville. There Mary was tapped to serve as the manager of the Diocese of Florida Episcopal Bookstore and she continued her fight for fair wages and access to employment for underserved populations as a volunteer.

Upon returning to Tallahassee in 1977, Mary applied her advocacy skills for the next 19 years as the Director of Public Information at Apalachee Community Mental Health Services where she developed deep relationships with co-workers and passionately opened the hearts and minds of the community to the importance of access to mental health services. Mary became a force for justice which would later culminate in the creation of “Mary Hardison Day” in Tallahassee on November 14, 1996. Mary co-founded the Tallahassee chapter of Bread for the World to fight hunger locally and worldwide. In 1985, she was recognized by the U.S. Congress for her anti-hunger work at a World Food Day ceremony. She was honored with a Meritorious Achievement Award from Florida A&M University and was named Public Servant of the Year in 1986 by the Tallahassee Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

Throughout her career and into her retirement Mary’s deep passion for those who are imprisoned lead her to become a founding member of the Kindred Spirits Charitable Trust which serves death row inmates of Florida State Prison. She corresponded for over 25 years with many inmates, including an exonerated former death row inmate Rudolph Holton who calls her Mom. She

felt their prayers and love especially after she became a widow in 1990 and as her illness raged on.

The rights of LGBTQ citizens were important to her and she was often the lone voice in church leadership calling for inclusion, as battles over ordination and marriage erupted throughout the past 20 years. She personally demonstrated that caring for people with HIV and AIDS was the right thing to do while protests to keep them from public activities were prevalent.

She is survived by her children Paul Hardison of St. Augustine, FL, Carol Hardison of Charlotte, NC and Ann Davison (Jim) of Basye, VA; granddaughter Melissa Hardison and great grandson Alexander Bowyer of Jacksonville, FL; sister-in-law Shirley and her children nephew and niece Baxter Early (Connie) and Lynn Brown (Danny); and her nieces and nephews Pam Wrike, Milton Wrike (Martha), Lynne Evans (Tim) and Mark Harrison (Becky).

A memorial service will be held at First Presbyterian Church of Tallahassee on Saturday, July 1 at 10:00 am with a reception following in Westminster Hall. Interment will follow at a later date in Jacksonville, FL. Memorial gifts can be made to Bread for the World, 425 Third Street, SW, Suite 1200, Washington DC 20024 and Kindred Spirits Charitable Trust, PO Box 3373, Tallahassee, FL, 32315. Todd wahlquist with Bevis Funeral Home,([www.bevisfh.com](http://www.bevisfh.com), 850-385-2193), is assisting the Hardison family with their arrangements.

# Previous Events

## Memorial Service

JUL 1. 10:00 AM (ET)

First Presbyterian Church  
110 North Adams Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32301