



# Retirement News Highlights

Tuesday, September 7, 2021

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## Genevieve M. Knight, a longtime math educator at historically Black colleges and universities, dies

By Frederick N. Rasmussen

**Baltimore Sun**

September 1, 2021

Genevieve M. Knight, a nationally known math educator whose nearly four-decade career teaching and mentoring students was spent at historically Black colleges and universities, died Aug. 19 at Riderwood by Erickson Senior Living in Silver Spring of complications of a stroke. The longtime Columbia resident was 82.

“Genevieve is a great American and human story who took great pride in teaching teachers,” said Freeman A. Hrabowski III, who since 1992 has been the president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and first got to know Dr. Knight when he was a student in the late 1960s at what is now Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. “She had an excellent mind, strong heart and was a strong voice, and as they say in the South, she could read people.”

Genevieve Madeline Knight was born and raised in Brunswick, Georgia, the daughter of Thomas Knight, a civil service worker at Warner Robins Air Force Base near Macon, Georgia, and at Naval Air Station Glynco in Brunswick, and his wife, Ruth Brown Knight, a seamstress.

Dr. Knight and her two sisters were raised in the Jim Crow South by parents who believed in education.

“Their parents never finished high school,” said her niece Tia Wright of Columbia.

After graduating from the segregated Risley High School in Brunswick, Dr. Knight began her college education at Fort Valley State College in Fort Valley, Georgia, now Fort Valley State University, where her sisters earned their bachelor’s degrees and were members of Alpha Kappa Mu Honor Society, Beta Kappa Chi scientific honorary society and Delta Sigma Theta sorority.

Dr. Knight’s older sister, Gwendolyn Elizabeth Humphrey, taught mathematics and computer science at Florida A&M University until her death, and her middle sister, Loretta Jean Wright, was a high school science teacher and later a project officer at the Annenberg/CPB Foundation in Washington. She lives in Silver Spring.

“It was Gwen who taught her how to ride a bicycle, dance, play cards and be political,” according to a biographical profile submitted by Dr. Knight’s family.

Math was not Dr. Knight's first career choice. During the fall of 1957, she was studying home economics hoping to become a commercial dietitian.

"Because of Sputnik and her academic record in the sciences, she was recruited to help make America the first country to reach the moon," according to the profile. "From among the offerings, she chose mathematics because it had fewer labs than any of the sciences. Her calculus teacher and along with her sister Gwen groomed her for a fellowship at Atlanta University."

After graduating from Fort Valley State in 1961, she earned her master's degree two years later from Atlanta University, and following her graduation, Dr. Knight became a National Science Foundation fellow, which brought her in contact with college math teachers across the country.

While attending an NSF lecture one day she began speaking with a woman who had earned a Ph.D. in math and she made the decision she wanted to do the same thing. In 1970, she earned her Ph.D. in mathematics education from the University of Maryland, College Park.

She began teaching at Hampton Institute in 1963 and taught there until 1966 when she took a break to get her Ph.D. She returned to Hampton in 1970 and continued teaching there until 1985 when she moved to Baltimore and joined the math faculty of what is now Coppin State University.

"I met her when I was a student at Hampton and she was a young instructor and I got to know her well," Dr. Hrabowski recalled. "We used to sit in her office and discuss math."

After earning a master's degree in math in 1971 and a Ph.D. in higher education administration in 1975, both from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Dr. Hrabowski came to Coppin State where he was a math professor and dean of arts and sciences.

"We were looking for a math instructor and I called Genevieve and she said, 'Why not me?' and she had years of experience," he said. "And then she said, 'I like Baltimore and the Maryland Retirement System and I'm ready for a new challenge there.' And that's when she came to us in the 1980s."

He said Dr. Knight contacted many national agencies and was successful in getting educational grants. "She wanted to help prepare young people who wanted careers teaching math," he said. "She was passionate about teaching children and young people about math."

But Dr. Knight could be demanding as she sought excellence for her students.

"I thought she could be tough on students but she had a big heart," Dr. Hrabowski said. "Genevieve cared and expected much. She had high academic standards and she believed in making them the best possible math educators. She didn't come from privilege and she took pride in teaching teachers, and she did it with love and care. She was very Southern in the best sense of the word and she never met a stranger."

She encouraged her students to take all the courses they could, including languages, management and technology. She urged them to attend professional meetings and develop relationships with professors for graduate and postgraduate opportunities.

Throughout her lengthy career, Dr. Knight was a strong advocate for equity for women and minorities, especially when it came to math and mathematics education communities.

“She was outspoken and could speak truth to power. And if the subject was awkward, and she believed in it, she’d speak the truth. She was outspoken in the best sense of the word and when she spoke, people listened,” Dr. Hrabowski said. “She let people know that she had heard them in that deep Southern accent of hers.”

Dr. Knight earned distinguished teaching awards from both Hampton and Coppin, and as a mentor, she was presented the Outstanding Faculty Award for Mathematics and Mentoring of Minority Youth from the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

In 1996, she was named the Wilson H. Elkins distinguished professor for the University of Maryland System, and three years later, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics came her way. She had also been a member of the organization’s board.

Even though Dr. Knight retired from Coppin in 2006, she continued to support projects and programs at the university.

She received the Dr. Etta Z. Falconer Award for Mentoring and Commitment to Diversity from Infinite Possibilities in 2015.

Dr. Knight was an avid reader and “dreamer,” according to the profile.

“Her life was math and math education, and she loved traveling the world mentoring future generations,” her niece Ms. Wright said.

Dr. Knight left her body and brain to the Maryland Anatomy Board.

A memorial service will be held at 2 p.m. Sept. 18 in the J. Millard Tawes Center Ballroom at 2500 W. North Ave. Earlier that day at 11 a.m., the university will confer emeritus faculty for Dr. Knight.

In addition to her niece and sister, Dr. Knight is survived by another niece, Ursula Wright of Silver Spring.

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