Memorial Resolution

Ernest Spaights

When Ernest Spaights, professor of Educational Psychology and Social Welfare, died on June 6, 1991, his departments, the University, and, indeed, the greater Milwaukee community lost a truly dedicated and creative leader. His loss will be felt by many persons -- his faculty colleagues, his many students and advisees, and many citizens of Milwaukee whose lives were touched by his care and concerned involvement.

Dr. Spaights joined the Department of Educational Psychology in 1965 as an Assistant Professor. With extensive publications and several teaching awards, he moved rapidly through the ranks to Professor. Administration also was one of his many talents and in 1968 Chancellor J. Martin Klotsche selected Ernest to become his Special Assistant for Educational Opportunity. This assignment was followed by eight years as Assistant Chancellor for Student Services and Special Programs. Under Dr. Spaights' dynamic leadership, student recruitment efforts dramatically increased the number of ethnic minority students attending UWM and several innovative student service programs (including the Department of Learning Skills and Educational Opportunity) were initiated to serve our increasingly diverse student body.

In 1979, Ernest Spaights was named to the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee School of Social Welfare’s Leon H. Sullivan Professorship. The Sullivan Chair was the first of UWM’s endowed professorships to be named for an African American, Leon Sullivan the founder of the Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America. The intention of the Leon Sullivan Professorship was to utilize the organizational strengths and resources of the University in ways which would meaningfully affect the community. As the first Sullivan Professor, Dr. Spaights was responsible for developing liaisons between the various manpower and training centers in the Milwaukee community and the University’s numerous research endeavors; for providing technical assistance to the corporate community regarding affirmative action, minority recruitment, and program design and evaluation; for developing proposals to obtain manpower funds and to initiate curriculum changes; and for monitoring manpower legislation for potential funding sources as relevant to political realities.

In addition to his responsibilities as the Sullivan Professor, Dr. Spaights worked closely with many community organizations including the Milwaukee Urban League, the Opportunities Industrialization Center, the Wisconsin Heart Association, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews. As a dedicated community leader, Dr. Spaights helped establish goals for the City of Milwaukee through his participation in the Goals for Milwaukee 2000 Committee.
Dr. Spaights' energies and commitment far exceeded the confines of campus and even of the Milwaukee area as evidenced by his many publications and presentations to national audiences.

Ernest Spaights was a warm, gentle, caring individual, who despite his many duties and responsibilities, was never too busy for students or colleagues when issues needed to be clarified or problems resolved. He was extremely supportive of students and particularly sensitive to the needs of minority students. He was a mentor for many minority students, providing them with direction, acting as an advocate to help meet their needs, and, on occasion providing students in dire need with financial assistance from his personal resources.

In addition to his commitment to advising and counseling, his students, Dr. Spaights also was a dedicated mentor for new faculty members facing the unfamiliar and sometimes ambiguous demands of achieving tenure. His willingness to assist his newer colleagues in evaluating their scholarly endeavors and to provide positive and constructive criticism of their work made their paths to tenure less cumbersome. Finally, his concern for the welfare of his faculty colleagues was not limited to giving advice, but often included his agreeing to participate on or chair tenure review committees.

Professor Spaights' dedication to the expansion of the number of minority faculty at UWM was reflected in his extensive efforts in minority recruitment. Dr. Spaights chaired the recruitment committee in Social Welfare that successfully located and hired three minority faculty members in a two year period. Similarly, his extensive efforts in the Department of Educational Psychology led the Department to become one of the most diverse on campus.

Ernest was candid, firm, and objective with a delightful sense of humor. Ernie was a true Renaissance Man with interests ranging from the Milwaukee Symphony and the theatre to an occasional trip to Las Vegas to test his skill at the Blackjack table. He will be missed by students and colleagues alike, not only for his many academic and leadership contributions, but also for being the warm and caring friend he was to many of us.

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