

*The Laborers' District Council of Metropolitan Philadelphia & Vicinity and its member affiliates mourn the untimely passing of our friend, colleague and brother, James Harper, Sr. We extend our heartfelt sympathy to his family and his union family, the members of Laborers' Local #413.*



The Chester Spirit, Wednesday, December 28, 2011

## **Hundreds say goodbye to beloved union leader James Harper**



By

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Hundreds gathered at St Luke Community Christian Church, 320 Tilghman St., Chester, Wednesday morning to pay their respects to the late business manager of the International Laborer's Union Local 413, James N. Harper, Sr.

Harper, the second generation leader of the union his father founded, died Dec. 19<sup>th</sup> at age 70 and 'left a legacy', according to Pastor Meredith Harper, one of several ministers who celebrated the life of the activist. The other pastors who gave praise were Rev. Dr. Bayard S. Taylor, Jr., of Calvary Baptist Church; Rev. Jeremiah W. Witherspoon, of Temple Baptist Church, who delivered the eulogy; and Rev. Katherine Jacobs.

Friends and colleagues who attended the service included Chester Mayor Wendell N. Butler Jr., Delaware County Democratic Party Chairman David Landau, state Rep. Thaddeus Kirkland (D-159), Barbara Muhammad from the Chester Prison Re-Entry Group, and many others.

Mayor-Elect John Linder and former Gov. Ed Rendell were among hundreds of union members, community people and others who attended a public viewing at the union's 222 Penn St. headquarters Tuesday night.

Kirkland, who is also pastor of Community Baptist Church, spoke about Harper's modesty. "Whenever you heard anyone compliment him", Kirkland told the audience, "He would always say, 'No, no. let my work speak for me.'"

The business manager of the International Laborers' Union of North America, Ryan Boyer, also spoke about Harper's unassuming personality. Boyer said, "In an age ruled by ostentatiousness and bling, Harper was a modest man. He was a meat and potatoes guy. You either got the work done or just got it not done."

Harper was born in Chester Sept. 19, 1941 and attended Chester High School until his junior year when he transferred to Upper Darby High School. According to Harper's childhood friend, Alan "Patches" Crews, Harper was one of just a few Blacks to attend Upper Darby at that time.

After graduating from high school, Harper started working at Local 413 and used his saved money to finance his own post-secondary education, which started at West Virginia State University (WVSU). There, Harper studied as an education major, organized open houses for perspective students, and participated in Civil Rights rallies — all activities that foreshadowed his work at Local 413.

Harper also served in the ROTC (Reserve Officer's Training Corps) program while attending WVSU and served in Vietnam after attending graduate school at Penn State University.

In 1977, three years after rejoining Local 413, Harper was elected business manager, the highest ranking executive position in the union. In that capacity, Harper was instrumental in keeping the 413 Union Hall in Chester and, among many other accomplishments, fighting to drive out a company that threatened Chester's environment. That accomplishment was mentioned by Mayor Wendell N. Butler, Jr. in his recollections.

According to Butler, Harper went into his office to talk about the company that was not identified during the service.

"He (Harper) said to me, 'Close your eyes, because you're not going to like what you see.'" Butler added that before he was able to notice, there was an overwhelming presence of Union 413 protesters and the company relocated.

Teesha and Semaje Harper, both pre-teens, expressed how they miss their Grandpa. "He was always there for me," Teesha said.

If there was any sentiment expressed by Harper's entire family, it was encapsulated in, *His Journey's Just Begun*, a poem "humbly submitted (by) the Family" and printed in the service program. Taylor read the poem aloud. The first four lines said, "Don't think if him as gone away. His journey's just begun. Life holds so many facets. This Earth is only one."

During the eulogy, Witherspoon reiterated how Harper was still spiritually alive, if only more humorously.

"There's this rumor that Jim's dead," Witherspoon said, and that such was not surprising, considering that "Chester is a rumor factory." On a more serious note, Witherspoon added, "There's only one life and that's eternal life."

Harper's son, James, Jr., last week became the third generation leader as the union's Executive Board appointed him the new business manager. He told the *Spirit* that the union will continue its benevolent and community-supportive activities as if his father was still alive. "Nothing's changed," Harper said.