

In Loving Memory

William E. Lawson

January 17, 1948 - August 28, 2020

William Edward Lawson, aged 72, died on August 28, 2020, shortly after suffering a stroke. He departed this life peacefully, surrounded by his children, carried out on the voices of friends and family telling him of their love.

A beloved counselor, minister, relative, and friend, William E. Lawson felt that his life was miraculous and blessed, despite or perhaps because of his troubled early years and his later health problems. He was born on January 17, 1948, in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York, the sixth of nine children born to Mozell Lawson (nee Sanders), who was born and raised in Alabama. He graduated from Boys High School and, in 1968 he married his love, Jeannette Gombs; their union produced a daughter, Nadya, and son, Jemal, Although the couple divorced in 1981, they remained close until his passing.

William always worked, shining shoes as a youngster, working as a clerk in the local Army Navy store, and then as a bank teller. In 1972, William, as part of a small wave of young Black and Puerto Rican men, got a rare opportunity to join the apprentice training program in Local 40 of the International

Association of Bridges, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Ironworkers, a result of fierce organizing and a successful lawsuit against famously racist NYC unions. William worked on NYC landmarks including one of the twin towers of the original World Trade Center and the Helmsley Palace Hotel. After a few years and an injury, he worked for the Associated Press as a photographer.

William loved photography. He also loved books, and music, and plants, and dogs, and cars. Most of all, he loved his family – and he defined family broadly. He was a nurturing and playful father and uncle; he made the children in his orbit feel important, and he always made sure they ate. With his siblings, cousins, and many friends, he was funny and sarcastic and sometimes exasperating. William had a ready smile, a distinctive and infectious laugh, and a gentle, caring spirit. People often turned to him for advice, and he was the go-to person in times of trouble.

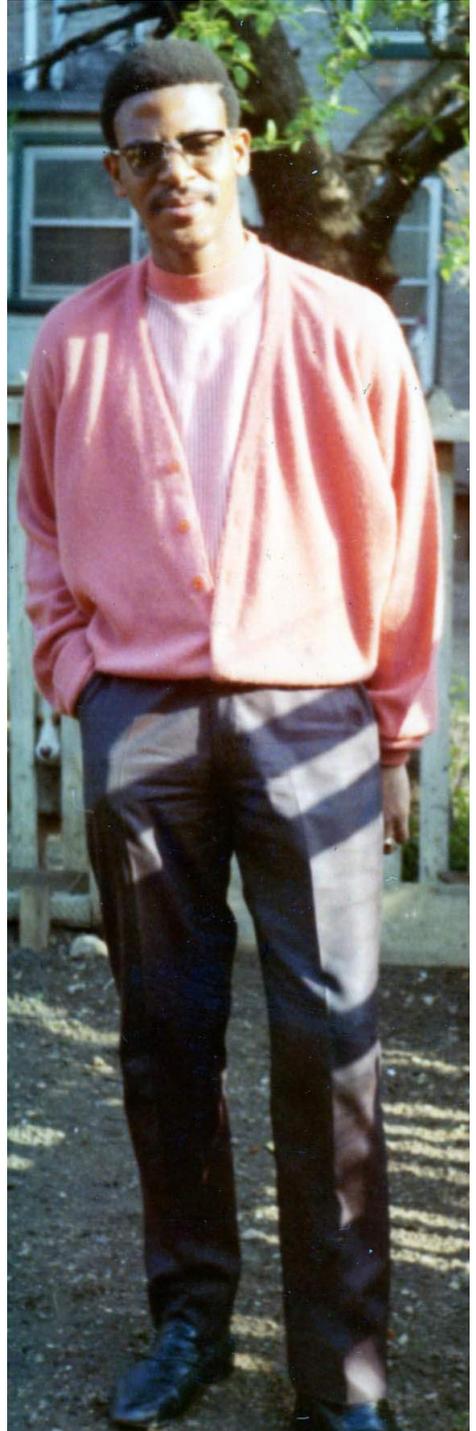
At the same time, from his teens into his early forties, William struggled with substance abuse and addiction. He would later talk about those years with regret, acknowledging the toll that struggle took on his body, his lost opportunities, his marriage, lost years with his children, and the strain on his family. He also talked about his life as a Black child and man in NYC, how he felt the absence of close male role models, the difference made by one specific teacher who fought for him, the racism he saw around him,

including harassment by police, gangs, and the friendships made and lost in his addiction.

William endured a series of tragedies in the 1980s, including the death of his beloved younger brother, Nathaniel, the murder of his daughter from a liaison prior to his marriage, Terandia Mitchell, and the deaths of several of his cousins and friends. After repeated relapses from drug treatment and rehab programs, he left Brooklyn for Dayton, Ohio, where much of his extended family had settled, and which had already been a place of refuge for him.

In Dayton, William found his life's calling. He entered the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center, got free from drugs and developed a new-found faith in Christ. He went from being a resident to an employee, working as a supervisor at the shelter. He then worked in the now defunct Grandview Hospital drug rehabilitation center as an intake counselor, and then at the DePaul Center where he counseled men in the shelter program. He went to community college and became a certified Chemical Dependency Counselor.

William identified with the struggles of the people he met, especially young men. He understood barriers to recovery, both the external blocks imposed by institutions, arbitrary rules, and racist practices and structures, as well as people's internal demons. He understood loss.



William joined Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church and immersed himself in studying the Bible. He internalized Jesus' message of love and justice, the need to name the systems that crush people's lives and spirits while also tending to individuals' souls and bodily needs. He led study groups and began to preach. He was ordained as a minister at the church under Reverend Samuel Winston in 2002.

Drawing together the lessons of his own life, his faith journey, and his knowledge of systems, William developed a faith-based 12-step recovery program and began facilitating those groups, cultivating a network of group leaders, and expanding beyond Mt. Calvary. This program evolved into the Christian Community Action Coalition – Addiction Outreach Ministry, a non-profit organization that could receive grant funding. He also created the Fatherhood Curriculum, a faith-based program geared especially towards young Black men, and poor men.

During this time, he married again; the marriage was not a good one but from its wreckage came the daughter of his heart, Jasmine McKinney. William started leading groups at the Linden Ave Baptist Church, working with Reverend Pamela Wantz, who wanted to serve people in recovery beyond the traditional 12-step approach. He joined the church in 2006, preaching and eventually serving as associate pastor.

His early years caught up with him and William endured several health ailments, not always with grace but usually with humor. During his many hospital stays, he invariably wound up counseling and praying for hospital personnel. He had a way of making people from all walks of life feel comfortable. He spent the last two years of his life with his children and grandchildren, moving to Atlanta, Georgia, for several months to stay with Jemal and family, before moving to Albany, New York to stay with Nadya and her son. He died in Albany, and his remains were cremated.

Predeceased by two brothers, Edwin and Nathaniel, daughter Terandia, and his mother, Mozell, William is survived by his children, Nadya, Jemal (Melinda), and Jasmine; grandchildren: Jasmyn, Desiree, Erik, Ernie, Charisma, Jemal Jr., Darius, Christina, Jason, and MiAmour; and three great-grandchildren; siblings: James (Helen), Evelyn, Marie, Loretta, and Barbara (Joseph); nieces and nephews Randall, Larry (Danielle), Tracy, Nina, Shelley, Kenneth, Patrice, Ebony (Sedric), and Samara; several great nieces and nephews, many cousins including his cousin-bro Fred Diggs, and countless friends. He will be missed.