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Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward, 1948-2016

Abstract

This is an obituary for Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward, professor of education at California State University San Bernardino who died in March 2016.

Keywords

education, obituary

Author Statement

John Winslade is a professor in the College of Education at California State University San Bernardino.

Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward

1948-2016

Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward passed away on March 23rd, 2016. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, she lived a substantial part of her life in California. Family members knew her as Ruth (her middle name), but at California State University San Bernardino she was known as Thelma (her first name). In the College of Education she had been the chair of the Education Leadership and Curriculum Department. She was a member of this department for ten years, after transferring from California State University Long Beach, where she worked for six years. She taught classes in educational administration and was a foundation faculty member of the educational doctorate degree (EdD). She also taught classes at the University of Southern California, which was her alma mater.

Dr. Moore-Steward retired from California State University San Bernardino in the Fall of 2015 but continued to teach part-time right up until her death. In fact, she was due to give the final exam for her last class on the evening of the day she passed away.

She began her long education career as a teacher in Inglewood, and later became a counselor, before moving on to become a Principal at Kennedy High School in the La Palma School District. In the same district, she later served as Assistant Superintendent and did the same job in St. Louis, Missouri, and then in Boston, Massachusetts. When she returned to California, she became the Superintendent of the school district in Richmond. This wide experience of administration became the basis from which she taught others to take up school leadership roles.

Her funeral in Orange County was attended by many members of the College of Education and the California State

University San Bernardino community, as well as by dozens of family members and friends. There, many members of her family, as well as her colleagues, spoke lovingly of her contributions to many people's lives. Thelma or Ruth, as she was variously known, loved to talk and a number of people testified both to the length at which she would talk and to the benefits she bestowed when she did so. She had the knack of making each person she talked to feel like they were special. Indeed she spent many hours, not only advising those who sought her out, but also making calls and writing letters on their behalf. Often she served as an academic guide, especially to her many nieces and nephews, on matters to do with school choice and academic decision-making.

Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward was also active in a number of causes. She took young people to visit historically Black colleges and universities. She was active in a series of churches and in many civic and civil rights groups. She contributed to a number of health charities and medical research institutions. She sponsored African children. She took on the organization of family reunions as one of her projects. She was also an accomplished cellist, an alto vocalist, and an enthusiastic participant in church and community choirs.

Dr. Angela Louque is chair of the department that Dr. Moore-Steward was part of during the final part of her career. She contributed this story in tribute.

Approximately 10 years ago, Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward and I were awarded a Professors Across Borders grant. We were able to visit and conduct research in the African country of Ghana to study leadership

in schools, particularly during Ghana's 50th anniversary of independence.

In 1957, Ghana won its independence from Great Britain, under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah. Over a period of forty years, 1961-2001, numerous education reform acts were passed and implemented to continually meet educational needs and aspiration of the Ghanaian people.

For ten days, Dr. Moore-Steward and I examined practices of administrators in schools throughout the country, as well as studying the preparation and selection of Ghana's primary and secondary school leaders.

During our trip, we were able to visit primary and secondary schools, as well as the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. The preparation of school leaders there was vastly different to what we do here in the United States. We quickly realized that the cultural respect that was given to teachers and school leaders was simply a given expectation.

Our trip together not only broadened our views about how to better prepare school leaders, but also how to better prepare our students who would be working with African American K-12 students. The experience was an example of Thelma's love of learning, love of learning about African culture and practices, and integrating that learning into teaching at the university.

One of my most memorable experiences with her was during this trip. Along with visiting the schools, museums, and W.E.B. DuBois' grave, we also visited Cape Coast's slave castle. As we got out of the van to go into the castle, our mood went from being giggly and excited to solemnness and sadness. As the tour guide told us of the atrocities, and pointed to poignant archeological treasures, we went from disbelief to even further disbelief. Yes, we'd read about it, seen Roots, the movie, and taught about it, but nothing really prepared us for standing in the actual space of fear and terror of the unknown for those captured in that slave castle.

While others strolled through eagerly chatting, we began walking in silence, smelling the centuries old stench of what was left of the castle's human fluids and remains. The smell and the eeriness of knowing that people had suffered such inhumaneness were simply overwhelming. The agony of it all brought tears and Thelma just sat down in distress. We both cried until there were no more tears left.

She saw The Door of No Return that day in the castle that slaves had gone through to board ships. On March 23rd, 2016, she entered another Door of No Return.

Twillea Evans-Carthen, chair of the University Diversity Committee, remembers Dr. Moore-Steward as a "beautiful spirit with a contagious smile." She recognized her as someone "whose faith was strong" and as "knowing how to put people at ease when they were hurting." She paid tribute to Dr. Moore-Steward's facilitation of university diversity trainings. "She was an amazing facilitator. She was on the diversity committee for years. She participated in the 'Conversations on diversity' series, and was a trainer of other diversity trainers." Said Twillea Evans-Carthen, "I still miss her today."

Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward was an active member of the faculty group who taught in and developed the Educational Doctorate program in educational leadership. The current Director of this program is Dr. Donna Schnorr. She offered the following words of tribute.

I honor Thelma's conviction toward principles of justice and equity, as well as her outward focus and compassion, despite her own personal adversities. She committed herself toward having a positive impact on the lives of others, and her spirit and memory will live on through everyone she touched.

When my mother passed in October of 2015, despite Thelma's struggles with her own

health, she took the time to include a post in my mom's *Life Remembered* book that touched my heart.

She said, "May you find comfort in the numerous great memories of your times together with her."

I strongly recall Thelma sharing with me the manner in which she looked at her own diagnosis with cancer. She indicated to me that in some ways, it was a part of life, and that it was always a matter of your attitude and mental state. One would honestly not have known that Thelma was ill because of her positive spirit, her resilient attitude, and her consistent focus on others. I never heard Thelma complaining or feeling sorry for herself or her situation. Thelma modeled what it looks like to stay true to your beliefs and convictions in words and in action.

Dr. Bonnie Piller was formerly a Director of the EdD program while Dr Moore-Steward was involved. She too offered words of tribute.

Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward was a dear friend to many faculty and students at California State University San Bernardino. She found joy in every day and was quick to create laughter and inspiration. A specific occasion that brings memories of Thelma is the doctoral student study trip to China. Her appreciation for Chinese history, the Chinese educational system and present day activities was felt by the entire group. Her quick humor and unique insights enriched the trip.

Another memory for me was sharing hugs and tears with her the day that Barack Obama won the first state primary. What a gift she gave me that day to make me feel an equal with her in celebrating that such a day could come in our lifetimes.

Thelma showed all of us what courageous living, in the face of illness, could be. She allowed us to cheer her on in good times and cry with her when set-backs occurred. Through all her suffering in the last few years of her life those around her knew she lived to

feel the satisfaction of being a teacher and mentor.

I think of Thelma often and miss her dearly.

One of those who spoke at her funeral was Dr. Sherri Franklin-Guy of the Special Education Rehabilitation and Counseling Department. She gave this tribute too in writing.

Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward was a remarkable woman—a classic scholar, brilliant educator, intellectual and respected colleague. She distinguished herself as an administrator in various school districts, as well as a teacher-scholar in higher education. Dr. Moore-Steward presented with integrity and was a principled advocate for quality in education, as she moved tirelessly about the educational system modeling best and equitable practices. Indeed, she was a gracious servant, a trusted steward of education, and will be missed for her honorable professional actions and efforts.

Thelma Moore-Steward's memory will be carried forward by those who knew her best, especially her husband John Steward, her ten siblings, and her more than eighty nieces and nephews, not to mention her many cousins. Her memory will also undoubtedly be cherished by those whom she taught and by her colleagues at California State University San Bernardino. Here is a tribute from Dr. Sonya Scott, one of her students.

I first met Dr. Thelma Moore-Steward nine years ago as I pursued an administrative credential. As my professor, she took me under her wing and mentored me for many years. She was my professor, mentor and friend.

I will forever treasure her friendship and mentorship as she continuously encouraged me to be resilient in the face of adversity. She inspired me to remain persistent in my

educational endeavors and to focus only on the outcomes that will impact the lives of students. She believed in me, even when I didn't believe in myself.

I will always remember Dr. Moore-Steward for her soul. She was truly an authentic soul, one that loved and cared for others deeply. She frequently offered the emotional nourishment to enable others to see their value and purpose.

I can recall so many precious memories that I have had with her. However, what has stood out the most to me is that, prior to her passing, she reached out to me to give me another opportunity to work with her. She was concerned about my pursuit for adjunct positions at a time in which she should have been focused on her health. She cared about me and wanted to ensure that I still had her guidance and mentoring. I will never forget the last days with her, which were just a few days before her death.

It is fitting that these tributes from her colleagues and students are recorded here. They add to and enrich the facts of her life listed above. Our hope is that those who knew her best will take comfort from those who have given tribute here. While they pertain to parts of her life only, they represent her time at California State University San Bernardino and speak to the place of esteem and respect she occupied here.