

Richmond Times-Dispatch November 21, 2024 TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

Michael Paul Williams

Collie Burton III 1930-2024

‘A warrior for truth, Justice and healing,’ in Richmond and beyond



Pictured in this late 1990s photo are Audrey and Collie Burton, Cricket White, former Mayor Walter T. Kenney, Cleiland Donnan, the Rev. Sylvester "Tee" Turner and Rob Corcoran. KAREN GREISDORF

Whether he was hosting international gatherings, helping to create a more equitable voting system in Richmond or bringing Black and white clergy together to break bread, Collie Burton devoted his life to positive change, locally and globally.

Burton's milieu was civil rights, community activism and racial healing. His work took him far from Richmond to Zimbabwe, South Africa, Fiji and New Zealand through the Richmond-based Hope in the Cities, now known as Initiatives of Change USA.

His behind-the-scenes activism wasn't the type that made headlines. But it forged relationships that paved the way for Richmond, a historically insular and hidebound city, to openly confront its painful past within a global framework.

Burton, a longtime resident of the Carillon neighborhood, died Nov. 11, six days before he would have turned 94.

"Collie, to me, was this seasoned warrior. And he didn't waste his bullets," said his longtime friend, the Rev. Sylvester "Tee" Turner, pastor of Pilgrim Baptist Church.

"He didn't waste his time with things that were not substantive. He didn't waste his time with a lot of unnecessary engagement. He was always about pursuing a cause that was healthy and beneficial to the community he was serving."

Collie Burton III, born in Chesterfield County, served our community in a variety of ways after earning a business degree at what is now Virginia State University and serving as an Army lieutenant in Germany during that nation's post-World War II reconstruction.



Audrey and Collie Burton
ROB CORCORAN

He was the associate director of the Richmond Urban League, a member of the NAACP and the Richmond Community Action Board, and aided the Richmond Tenant Organization.

It was at the Urban League, Turner said, that Burton helped facilitate Richmond's transition from at-large voting in city elections to the current nine-district system installed in the aftermath of Richmond's racially motivated 1970 annexation of a portion of Chesterfield. In 1977, the new ward system produced the first Black majority on Richmond City Council.

But Burton realized that political change alone could not transform Richmond. So he began hosting regular breakfasts to bring Black and white faith leaders together.

“He said there’s never going to be transformation in Richmond until these clergy get to know each other,” recalled Rob Corcoran, former director of Hope in the Cities.

“That was very typical of Collie. He saw so clearly that this was a missing element,” said Corcoran, who described his friend as “a real warrior for God, for truth, and for racial healing.”

Burton and his wife, Audrey, turned out to be the missing element in what would become Hope in the Cities, whose 1993 Healing the Heart of America conference and Unity Walk, in partnership with then-Mayor Walter Kenney, was a remarkable pivot for a city that’d been loath to candidly discuss its brutally racist past.

We still have a ways to go in coming to terms with that past, but we’ve moved past silence and denial. It’s difficult to imagine the Richmond of June 2020 without those steps 27 years earlier.

Corcoran and his wife, Susan, met the Burtons shortly after moving from the United Kingdom to Richmond’s Carillon neighborhood, which they chose because of its history of intentional racial integration.

The Burtons, who lived across the street, welcomed the still-unpacking Corcorans. The couples became fast friends.

What would become Hope in the Cities in 1989 began as a series of informal gatherings, with the Burtons in the forefront.

Corcoran, whose family was steeped in the international movement known as Moral Re-Armament, arrived to a Richmond initially where people were hesitant to speak openly and honestly about racial issues.

The Burtons were different.

“They brought a directness into the conversations that had been lacking,” Corcoran said.

“They felt able to say directly that this is an issue which we have to confront. But they did it with such love and faith in people It was always an inspirational approach.”

“He said we spend so much effort in changing structures, but we have to keep going back and doing it again, because we did not change the hearts of people,” Corcoran recalled of Burton. “They very early on grasped the importance of this connection between personal change and social change.”

It showed in the couple’s interactions.

“They had so many occasions in their home with diverse groups of people,” Corcoran said. “And I think it’s fair to say that really the sort of roots of Hope in the Cities began with that friendship. And Collie was a really important part of that.”

The Burtons, who were married 53 years, met at a National Urban League conference in Atlanta. Collie Burton had just moved to Richmond; she was working for the civil rights organization in New Orleans.

Their growing international activism took them to a conference in Caux, Switzerland, where they met delegates from Zimbabwe shortly after that African nation had gained independence from the white-majority rule of the former Rhodesia.

They visited South Africa to meet community leaders shortly after that nation’s first free election after the fall of apartheid. Their journeys also took them to New Zealand to examine racism against the indigenous Maori people — an issue as current as today’s headlines. They also spent three months in Jamaica, and Collie Burton taught a class at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, she said.

A key moment in 1983 was an invitation to take an interracial group to Liverpool, England. Among the party were the Burtons and A. Howe Todd, then a senior assistant city manager. Collie Burton and Todd had been at loggerheads on different issues, Corcoran recalled.

Before the trip, the Burtons invited the Todds to their home and the couples became friends, a bonhomie that carried over to the Liverpool trip. Upon their return, that friendship “rippled through the community” in what Black leaders viewed as their enhanced dealings with Todd, Corcoran said.

“I saw him as a statesman,” Audrey Burton said. “He just was honest and morally upright. He was focused. He had a faith that he believed in, and he defended that faith.”

We live in times that test our faith. Honest conversations are being drowned out by shouting matches; the truth, by lies. It’s difficult for some of us to find hope. The changes we see on the horizon cause fear.

“In a political climate in our country where we are invited to degrade our neighbors, we could use more of the spirit of Collie Burton, who lived and taught us to dare to discover the good in our neighbors,” Allan-Charles Chipman, executive director of **Initiatives of Change USA**, said Wednesday.

“We will continue Collie Burton’s legacy by seeking to engage our community in his spirit for justice, understanding, and beloved community. Where there remain spirits dedicated to engaging the world like Collie Burton, there remains a great hope in our city and a great hope in our nation.”