

REMEMBERING

Rosa Bogar Activist, educator, designer

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She had a passion for fashion and African-American history

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Growing up in South Carolina, the fifth of 13 children, Rosa Mavins Bogar taught herself how to sew. After lights out, “she would finish an outfit by moonlight, to wear the next day,” recalled her sister Betty Moseley, of Minneapolis. “She could make an outfit a night. She was a sharp dresser.”

Bogar made her own clothes by hand, without patterns, as well as clothes for her six sisters, with whom she shared a single bed. “We were poor but rich in love and happiness,” said Moseley.

After graduating from a segregated high school in South Carolina, Bogar moved to New York, where she met and married boxer Leroy Bogar and moved to his hometown of Minneapolis in 1966.

In the Twin Cities, she honed her distinctive clothing style, favoring bold African patterns and head wraps. “She had a saying, ‘Wrap your head in knowledge’ ... the knowledge of our ancestors,” Moseley said.

In 1981, Bogar took part in a black fashion show in Minneapolis and was named top designer. That led to a chance to display her designs in the window of a downtown department store and participate in other, bigger shows. She also made pageant gowns for Miss Black Minnesota contestants. In 2012, Bogar produced a reunion show, “Black Fashion in the Twin Cities: 1970s through 1990s.” “You know the saying, ‘I’m black and I’m proud.’ The clothes showed that,” she told the Star Tribune.

Bogar worked to instill that pride in her students as a longtime education assistant in the Minneapolis Public Schools. “She was really passionate about the kids — even after she got out of teaching,” said her son Gregory Agnew. “She was always talking to kids and trying to educate them about history.”

At Richard R. Green Central Park Elementary School,

Bogar inaugurated the Green Tree awards to recognize students who demonstrated positive leadership skills, said teacher and friend Tonyus Chavers. “She was good friends with Dr. Green [Minneapolis’ first black superintendent] ... and she did a lot of things to keep his legacy alive.” Long after Bogar retired, she continued to return to the school for the annual award and to update the plaque with that year’s winner. She also had a purple plaque made to honor Prince, who attended the former Central High School, where the elementary school now sits. “I think he should be an inspiration to the children there today,” Bogar said when the plaque was installed in 2016 on the late musician’s birthday.

Bogar died Sept. 2 at age 77 after an illness. Right up until her death, she was at work on “The Ancestral Wrap Project,” a curriculum and board game she was developing to teach African-American youth about their roots.

She also gave frequent talks about civil rights and the Great Migration of blacks from the South to the North. “She thought everybody’s story was important,” said Agnew. A pet topic was the Orangeburg Massacre, a 1968 event in her South Carolina hometown when police opened fire on a crowd protesting racial segregation, killing three young men. “She wanted to educate people about what happened,” said Agnew. She returned so regularly to Orangeburg to talk about the massacre that she was given the key to the city and an honorary Rosa Bogar Day.

Bogar was also a poet, who published two collections, “Black Woman Suffering” and “Rosa: And Other Poems.” Her favorite poem was “Oh, Africa,” Moseley said.

In addition to Moseley and Agnew, Bogar is survived by her son John Agnew of Minneapolis; her siblings Delores Haney of New York, Aleane Moss of South Carolina, Julia Selton of Georgia, Willie Mavins Jr. of New York, Lillian Mims of South Carolina, Robert Mavins of Minneapolis and, Ola Stokes of South Carolina. She was preceded in death by her parents, Willie B. and Ola Mavins, and by four brothers. Services have been held.

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