

REMEMBERING REV. HELEN SINCLAIR

JULY 14, 1920 - JUNE 3, 2024



Project Sound Off Family

Second-generation Illinois chaplain and prison reform advocate Rev. Helen Elizabeth Sinclair passed away on June 3, 2024, at the age of 103. The daughter of the iconic Rev. Jessie “Ma” Houston, the first woman allowed to serve as a death row minister in Illinois and co-founder of Operation PUSH, Sinclair followed in her mother’s footsteps and lived a life in service of others. When she was young, she participated in the Freedom March with Dr. King and was involved with the NAACP and the Urban League.

Known affectionally as “Queen Mother,” Sinclair joined her mother in Illinois prisons at 16 years old. Together, they preached, taught, uplifted, and listened to individuals behind bars. They often brought much-needed resources like books, toiletries, and food.

Queen Mother was unwaveringly dedicated to her ministry and the individuals she supported. She served as a Prison Chaplain at Statesville Correctional Center and led worship services until her passing. Known for her ability to sing, pray, teach, and empower, she dedicated her life to teaching about reformation, providing spiritual guidance and support, and restoring dignity to folks on the inside.

Sinclair was ordained at Chicago’s St. Paul Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. In her 60s, she joined the Peace Corps and served in Malawi, further extending her reach of compassion and education. She later pursued higher education, earning a bachelor’s degree from Northeastern Illinois University in 1985.

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WE DEMAND TO BE HEARD

Project News

**SPECIAL EDITION #01
JUNE 2024**



She preached with a genuine belief that everyone is God's child, challenging inmates to redefine their identities and encouraging them to aspire to a better future.

Queen Mother worked closely with elected officials and community organizations to fight for the rights of incarcerated individuals to practice their religion and maintain their cultures. She walked with individuals of all faiths, urging them to understand their beliefs deeply and asking, "How can you serve?"

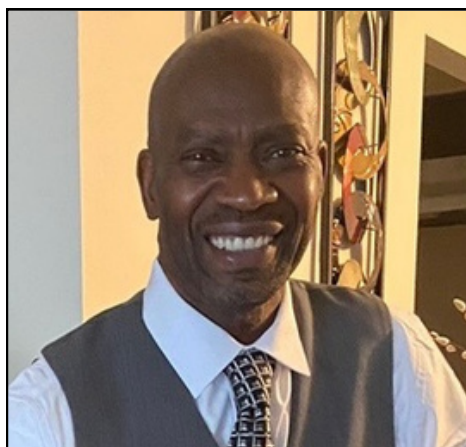
Every February, Queen Mother led a Black History Month Tour across the state. She would educate individuals behind bars about the struggles for freedom, the advances that Black people led after slavery, and inspiring inmates with stories of formerly incarcerated individuals who had turned their lives around. She opened their eyes to their unlimited potential by preaching history and scripture.

Queen Mother was also a passionate musician and singer. When her son Ryan Sinclair was young, they performed together in their living room, with Ryan playing the drums and her playing the piano.

Queen Mother also worked with women and juvenile facilities such as the Jesse "Ma" Houston Correctional Center, named after her mother, and Dwight Correctional Center.

Rev. Helen Sinclair's legacy is of faith, compassion, and relentless advocacy for oppressed people. Her life was a testament to the power of love and service, and her impact will be felt for generations to come.

QUEEN MOTHER HELEN SINCLAIR: THE PASSING OF A QUEEN



**Project Sound Off
Johnnie Khalif Veal**

Our beloved Reverend Queen Mother Helen Sinclair's journey has come to an end. Her lifetime of service in the prison ministry has been one of compassion, humility, grace, and fighting for the men and women who she called her family. She has followed in her mother's footsteps, who first kicked down the doors of the IDOC in the 1970s and said, "Let me into these prisons to bring God's word to my children."

The Prison Ministry, as we know it today, is named after her mother—the Jesse "MA" Houston Prison Outpost. Our Queen Mother has led an amazing life of service that spans over eight decades of struggle. The men and women behind the walls of the IDOC immediately bestowed upon her the title "Queen Mother." She not only brought the word of God to the prison community but also words of hope, inspiration, and wisdom for the soul.

She was our mother when we could not be with our own mothers. She shared our joys and pains when the world turned their backs on prisoners.

Queen Mother Helen Sinclair recognized that our lives had value and we were not throwaway rags. She had the unique ability to harness the talents of men and women in prison to turn them into community activists and bring out the best of their character as future leaders once they were released. Queen Mother always had an inspirational saying when things got rough. She would wave her bible and say that God sees everything, and he got this. God also said, "VOTE" to make a difference. She taught us the power of the vote and its history.

Queen Mother Helen Sinclair has touched us all in a special way and nurtured us to greatness when others abandoned us. Her legacy will be a life lesson that will live forever in us all. God knows her heart and sent her lifelong friend, Dr. Margaret T.G. Burroughs, ahead of her to open the doors to heaven so she could enter with all the glory.

Rest in peace by knowing that the seeds of hope you planted within your prison family will continue to bloom for generations to come.



Tributes

"My most fondest memory of Queen Mother was when I was in CCDOC-Div 1. I was reluctant to go to the event, but everyone on the tier had to. Once we got there, we were all shocked. She had a big spread set out before us of the most delicious food ever! We had mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, fried chicken, collared greens, and all kinds of treats!"

"She made me feel like a human being in the way she served us and gave us the opportunity to ask for seconds. She didn't preach to us or try to look down on us. I will never forget that."

-Gerardo Gonzalez

"Queen Mother was a trailblazer. She was a teacher, preacher, community leader, and organizer. She had unexplainable love for the men behind the walls. She would go to see them through rain or shine, sleet or snow. Even when she wasn't feeling well and when her birthday party was coming up. It was more important for her to spend time with the men behind the walls that it was to be at her own celebration."

-Ellawe McWilliam



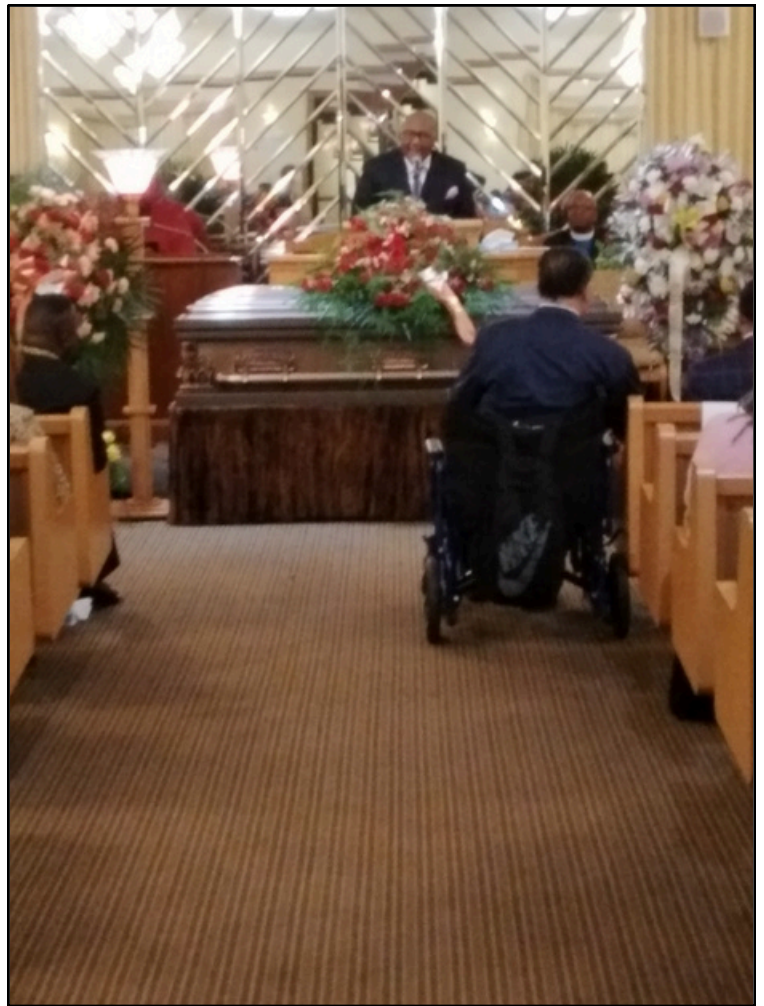
Photos provided by Ellawe McWilliam

A COMMUNITY MOURNS A QUEEN

QUEEN MOTHER'S FUNERAL SERVICES DREW HUNDREDS

Queen Mother Helen Sinclair was laid to rest in Chicago after a two-day funeral service for mourning and paying respects. Visitation services took place on Thursday, June 27, at Leak & Sons Funeral Homes in East Chatham, in the Martin Luther King Jr. room. Friends, political allies, and family members gathered to say their goodbyes and reflect on Queen Mother's life. The funeral services were held on Friday, June 28, in the afternoon and included an emotional performance by Santita Jackson, daughter of Civil Rights Leader Jesse Jackson.

Elected officials and community leaders, including former Chicago Alderman Bob Fioretti and Jesse Jackson, expressed their condolences and paid tribute to the Queen Mother's dedication to service. President Joe Biden and Illinois Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton sent a written proclamation in remembrance.



ABOUT PROJECT NEWS

Project News is the newsletter for the Project Sound Off organization. This paper, founded by Josie Jackson and Jazmine Salas, amplifies news about the criminal justice system and stories from individuals affected by mass incarceration. We are seeking writers, photographers, and content creators to submit pieces for Project News. Email j.salas@projectsoundoff.org to get involved!