


Aaron Graham <aaron@districtchurch.org> 
To: Bill Myers
Re: Ma Siss

August 23, 2013 3:34 PM

Sure! Thanks for your support and concern. Much love, Aaron

On Fri, Aug 23, 2013 at 3:30 PM, Bill Myers <uralchemist@gmail.com> wrote:
Aaron--

May I forward this to folks in our SS class? I think many of them would want to know about this good person.

Bill

On Aug 23, 2013, at 2:26 PM, Aaron & Amy Graham - The District Church <aaron@districtchurch.org> wrote:

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Dear Praying Friends,

I'm sad to share that our dear friend, mother and mentor, Ma Siss passed away on Wednesday. Below is an article the Boston Globe featured this morning about her life. Please keep the Quincy Street community in prayer.

The home going service will be Saturday, August 31st at 12pm, location is still being confirmed.

For those of you in Boston, and those able to make it, we look forward to seeing you there as we celebrate her life.

With Love,



[Idene Wilkerson, 76; matriarch of her Dorchester neighborhood](#)

By [Bryan Marquard](#)

| Globe Staff

August 23, 2013

Ma Siss, whose given name was Idene Wilkerson, died Wednesday.

By force of faith, and she had plenty to spare, Ma Siss was the guiding force that helped the [Quincy Street Missional Church](#) emerge amid the secular seediness of a former auto chop shop in her Dorchester neighborhood.

Discarded couches took the place of pews as the fledgling congregation grew out of a late-1990s prayer group and Ma Siss's Place, a nonprofit food bank and thrift shop in Dorchester that became a formal venue for the ceaseless charity she practiced all her life. From such tenuous beginnings, Ma Siss nurtured a new house of worship.

"I always believed in the Lord," she told the Globe for an award-winning 2007 series on the founding of the church. Faith, for her, was ever present. "I was born with it," she said.

Ma Siss, whose given name was Idene Wilkerson, died Wednesday in Boston Medical Center. Troubled for years by blood clots and diabetes, she was in her 70s when she died of a blood infection, said her daughter, Dora Vaughan.

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"She always put her own needs on the back burner to help out someone," said Vaughan, who lives in Dorchester. "It didn't matter if she knew you a day or if she knew you a hundred days, it was all the same. And once you came into her house and you met her for the first time, she considered you family. You were not a guest."



The Rev. Aaron Graham, founding pastor of Quincy Street Missional Church, met Ma Siss

more than a decade ago. A son of a Southern Baptist missionary, Graham was fresh out of college and felt spiritually called to Boston. He moved from Virginia and crossed paths with Ma Siss a few months later.

“I’ve never met someone with such a generous heart in all my life,” said Graham, who is now lead pastor of The District Church in Washington. “She exhibited that not just with her heart, but with her time, with her listening, with how she helped people financially. Ma Siss expressed the love of God in very tangible ways that impacted thousands of lives, one at a time. She always had it in her heart to give people a second chance and a third chance and a fourth chance.”

The church began holding services about a decade ago in the former garage. Leaning against a chain-link fence outside was a sign with hand-drawn words in red, yellow, blue, and green letters: “Please Come Pray Eat Worship.” In 2000, she mortgaged a house she owned on Drayton Avenue and bought the garage for \$70,000.

Two years later, she incorporated Ma Siss’s Place as a nonprofit to run the food bank and thrift shop, conduct counseling and outreach for a variety of needs, and generally advocate for a neighborhood and people who often are off the radar of conventional philanthropy.

Through thrifty living and wisely buying or co-owning rental properties, Ma Siss often had more money on hand than most. How much she handed out as loans through the years to friends and neighborhood acquaintances could not be counted.

Her nickname Ma Siss originated in childhood. A daughter of sharecroppers, she was born in Shorter, Ala., and grew up in Madison Park, outside Montgomery. As the youngest of several children, she was called Sis. In Boston, she was a mother to her biological children, her foster children, and untold others, and became simply Ma Siss.

Idene ‘Ma Siss’ Wilkerson incorporated Ma Siss’s Place as a nonprofit to run a food bank and thrift shop. Though she observed Aug. 3, 1937, as her birthday, Ma Siss was not sure whether the date or year were correct. But at 76, or thereabouts, her life had been unusually full, bringing her north from an impoverished childhood picking cotton in rural Alabama, where the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on the lawn of a man whose house she cleaned. Up north, she was at various times a maid for 14 families, sometimes serving at bar mitzvahs in Newton and Brookline.

“She wasn’t talkative,” said the Rev. Ralph Kee, lead pastor of Quincy Street Missional Church. “She had very limited formal education, but she had a really good mind. And when she did speak, people listened, and they did what she said, pure and simple.”

Those in the Uphams Corner part of Dorchester, and those who start filing into the church service just past noon each Saturday, knew Ma Siss had lived through the kinds of experiences that eclipse a more formal education.

Leaving the South in the 1960s, she boarded a Greyhound bus with her four children to join her husband, Willie Wilkerson, who had moved north earlier and was renting an apartment in a Boston three-decker.

For the past couple of decades, she and her husband lived apart in Dorchester. Her children struggled with substance abuse, stints in jail, or both. Her son Brian died at 31, and another son, Willie Jr., was finishing a jail term. As her children struggled, Ma Siss helped raise their children.

"I don't question what happens," she told the Globe for the series. "I figure God causes these things. You look at it, and you think it's bad, but in the long run, it come out good."

Family, which had a more expansive meaning for Ma Siss, was part of the good in life. "She had a heart that was bigger than the sky, you know," her daughter said. "And she loved everyone."

In addition to her daughter, son, and husband, Ma Siss leaves another son, LeDell Wilkerson of Dorchester; two sisters, Princess Glassby and Geneva Camel, both of Indianapolis; and more grandchildren and great-grandchildren than her daughter could count.

Ma Siss also raised as foster children the four Thompson brothers, Stephen, Terrance, Adam, and Keith, all of Dorchester. She thought of her decades-long friend and neighbor Darnell Booker as an adopted sister, Vaughan said, and she raised Arlene Baldwin from across the street as one of her own.

"Ma has been the mother to hundreds of people, and I really mean that," Graham said. "Whether it's her biological children or the many foster children she had, or the people off the street, or people trying to put their lives together, trying to recover from addiction."

He added that Ma Siss "was always full of grace to everyone. Everyone was always welcome in her home. Everyone was always welcome in the church, at Ma Siss's Place."

Over the decades Ma Siss made meals for hundreds of visitors. "Her food was heavenly," her daughter said. "Anyone who came and ate down at the church can vouch for that, so I'm not exaggerating."

A service will be announced for Ma Siss, for whom Quincy Street Missional Church owes its origin, in a building she bought.

"Without her, it never would have started," Kee said. "I hope it continues, now that she's gone."

Michael Paulson, a former Globe editor and reporter, chronicled the origins of the church in a series that received the 2008 Mike Berger Award from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, and two awards from the Religion Newswriters Association.

The series shed light on a woman who Graham said might not be well known outside Dorchester, but is famous in her neighborhood.

"She's the Mother Teresa of Boston," Graham said. "She really is, in the way she cares for the poor and how she inspired others to do the same. Everyone who needs a second chance or a third chance or a seventy-second chance knows they can go to see Ma Siss, because that's where they will receive grace."

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