

Resolution on the Death of Professor Gerald R. Gill

The History Department invites the Arts, Sciences and Engineering Faculty to join us in remembering our friend and colleague, Gerald R. Gill, whose unexpected death on July 26th at age 58 from arterial sclerosis has shocked and saddened us all.

Gerry grew up in New Rochelle, New York, and earned a B.A. in history from Lafayette College in 1970. Himself a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, he explored the history of African-American pacifism during the Twentieth Century for his doctoral thesis at Howard University. This project, and the history of the civil rights movement in Boston, motivated and informed his subsequent scholarly work, teaching, mentoring and public service.

Coming to Tufts as an assistant professor of American history in the fall of 1980, at a time when the Boston area was still convulsed with the racism of the anti-busing campaign, Gerry had some understandable misgivings about relocating to New England. He also, however, saw a challenge. His own contribution was to work to retrieve the long, rich and principled history of people of color in America and, especially, in New England and in its colleges and universities. Having published on the African-American opposition to the Vietnam War, he turned more recently to the Civil Rights movement in Boston, assisted by a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship at the Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture in 1997. He also held research fellowships at the W.E.B. Dubois Institute at Harvard and the Center for Afro-American Studies at U.C.L.A.

This scholarly work was a part of his larger dedication to service, and throughout the nearly three decades he was with us Gerry was a frequent speaker on African American history in the greater Boston area and on public radio and television, and was consultant for memorable WGBH productions like “Eyes on the Prize.” He was also committed to helping public school teachers develop their African American curriculum.

At Tufts, Gerry served the university community beyond his department by tirelessly working with the administration, admissions, the African American Center, and the Peace and Social Justice and American Studies Programs to build a multi-cultural, diverse campus community and to educate us all—with, for example, his memorable exhibition “Another Light on the Hill: A History of Black Students at Tufts University, 1900 to the Present.” Within the History Department Gerry was tireless as well, hardly ever refusing to serve on a committee and especially interested in issues concerning undergraduate education and advising. An associate professor from 1987, he served since 1998 as the department’s deputy chair.

It is, however, for his teaching and mentoring that Gerry Gill will be best and most appropriately remembered. His annual sequence on African American history, and his always wait-listed courses on the Civil Rights Movement or on Sports in America, challenged and inspired generations of students who were fortunate enough to get a seat.

Consistently students were impressed with Gerry's breadth of knowledge and ability to make the past live for them. He not only had larger enrollments and many more advisees than his colleagues but, yes, he did know all their names by sight, past as well as present generations (as he did the names of each of those custodians and meal servers too often invisible to the rest of us). At a university that prides itself on its commitment to teaching, Gerry defined the meaning of that commitment. Among his many advising and teaching honors, he was the first recipient of the Lerman-Neubauer Prize for Outstanding Teaching and Advising in 1998, the Community Senate's Professor of the Year in 1999, and twice named Massachusetts Professor of the Year (in 1995 and 1999). If Gerry was especially important as mentor for Tufts all-too-small black community—in 2000 the African American students honored him with the Distinguished Service Award (since renamed the Gerald Gill Award)—he was also clearly a star educator and role model for all of his students, regardless of race.

A quiet, modest and thoughtful man and a loving father, Gerry was also a smart dresser, an avid dancer and—in spite of his enforced New England residence—a fan of the New York Yankees.

We ask that this resolution be included in the minutes of the faculty of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, and that a copy be sent to Professor Gill's daughter Ayanna Gill.