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Isaiah 'Ike' Dixon, state delegate from Baltimore

Four-term delegate from Baltimore city helped get state law passed making cross burning a felony

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Isaiah Dixon (Submitted Photo / Baltimore Sun / May 2, 2013)

By Chris Kaltenbach, The Baltimore Sun
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Isaiah Dixon Jr., a jazz fan, world traveler and four-term state delegate from Baltimore City whose accomplishments included introducing a bill that made cross burnings a felony in Maryland, died of heart failure April 26 at Stella Maris Hospice in Timonium. He was 90.

"He took his position very seriously," said Baltimore Circuit Court Clerk Frank M. Conaway, a longtime friend who served two terms alongside Mr. Dixon in the General Assembly. "He thought that he needed to make a difference, and he tried."

"He was a gentle person, very soft-spoken, always had a big smile and a quick wit about him," said Shirley Gordon, who was friends with Mr. Dixon for some 30 years and who became his companion after his wife of 58 years, Miriam, died in 2005. "He really loved politics, he really thought the purpose was to help people."

A native of Baltimore, Mr. Dixon attended both city public and parochial schools, graduating from Frederick Douglass High in

1941. He later attended and played football at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Dixon also served in the U.S. Army, stationed in El Paso, Tex., until his honorable discharge.

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After establishing himself in the bail bonds, insurance and real estate businesses, Mr. Dixon decided to enter politics. He was elected to the House of Delegates in 1966, representing what was then the fourth district. He was re-elected three times.

As a legislator, Mr. Dixon paid special attention to matters dealing with the insurance industry, Mr. Conaway said. But his legislative work wasn't restricted to that area. In 1972, he introduced legislation urging that Harbor City Boulevard in Baltimore be re-named in honor of **Martin Luther King Jr.** — a similar resolution was finally passed 10 years later. In 1976, he introduced a bill giving the mayor of Baltimore the power to appoint the city police commissioner.

But Mr. Dixon may have been most proud of getting a bill passed that included a provision changing cross-burning from a misdemeanor to a felony.

"We fought for that and fought for that and fought for that," Mr. Conaway said. The pair even crossed swords with some members of their own party, Mr. Conaway noted, before the felony provision of the bill passed by a narrow 65-54 vote.

Mr. Dixon wasted little time making his mark in **Annapolis**. In April 1968, he was one of about 100 black leaders invited to a meeting with then-Gov. Spiro T. Agnew following race riots in Baltimore after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Some two-thirds of his audience walked out on Mr. Agnew after being castigated for "having run from their responsibilities for fear of being called 'Uncle Toms,'" according to an article in the Baltimore Afro-American.

Mr. Dixon later fired off a letter to the governor. "I firmly believe," he wrote, "the underlying source for the recent disorders were in reality created by a large segment of the white community in its efforts to deny black people their basic rights."

Unrest in the black community, Mr. Dixon suggested, would continue until "members of the white community are willing to adopt new attitudes, and get down to a positive and meaningful communication with their black brothers."

"He was always very steady, very serious about his business," said Mr. Conaway, who was elected to the first of two terms in the assembly in 1970. "He was not a hard-nosed person; he was always full of personality. And he really knew his way around."

The Democratic delegate earned a share of ignominy in 1978 when he introduced a bill that would have banned Randy Newman's song, "Short People," from the state's airwaves. After the attorney general's office issued an opinion that such a law would be unconstitutional, Mr. Dixon, who stood 5-foot-5, said he felt "let down, short-changed and a little upset."

Mr. Dixon, who had been elected vice-chair of the Baltimore house delegation in 1981, was denied a fifth term the following year. After being left off a ticket headed by Sen. Clarence M. Mitchell III and Del. Larry Young in the new 39th District, Mr. Dixon lost the seat by more than 2,500 votes.

"I don't think he expected to lose," Mr. Conaway said. "But he took it, and went about his business. I never heard him complain about it at all."

After leaving the House, Mr. Dixon waged an unsuccessful campaign for City Council in 1987. His days in elective office behind him, he returned to his insurance and bail bonds business.

Mr. Dixon was elected as a delegate to the 1976 **Democratic National Convention**. He served on the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors Arbitration Panel and on the board of directors of the **National Aquarium**. He was also a member of the **NAACP**, receiving that organization's Certificate of Honor in 1970; and of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, which awarded him a Life Membership Certificate in 1992.

Mr. Dixon's father, Isaiah Dixon Sr., had been well known in Baltimore as a jazz musician and owner of the Comedy Club, which became a frequent stop for touring musicians, including Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Dinah Washington and Sammy Davis Jr. The younger Dixon and his brother, Howard, took over operation of the club after their father's death in 1953. Even though the club closed in the 1960s, Mr. Dixon never lost his fondness for jazz.

Mr. Dixon also enjoyed playing bridge and traveling. He visited Russia in 2011; he and Ms. Gordon had planned a trip to China for last summer, but health concerns forced them to cancel, she said.

Mr. Dixon is survived by his son, Isaiah Dixon III, of Baltimore, and a daughter, Joyce Fuller-Wood, of Gary, Ind. He is also survived by three grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

A Mass of Christian burial is set for 10 a.m. Monday at St. Mary of the Assumption, 5500 York Road.

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