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Mitchell was too busy for retirement

By Mike Bowler

After advising presidents and shepherding federal civil rights legislation for a third of a century, Clarence M. Mitchell, Jr., had earned the quiet retirement of a civil rights giant emeritus.

But those who knew him well — including some who disagreed with him most vehemently — were marveling yesterday that Mr. Mitchell returned to Baltimore six years ago and battled on several local fronts until his death Sunday at age 73.

A memorial service for Mr. Mitchell is set for noon Friday at Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church, Dolphin and Etting streets.

In lieu of flowers, the family asked that contributions be made to the Lillie Carroll Jackson Museum or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,

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— Blair Lee III

whose Washington office Mr. Mitchell directed for many years. (Mrs. Jackson was Mr. Mitchell's mother-in-law.)

State Senator Clarence M. Mitchell III said yesterday that one of his father's greatest accomplishments after retirement was a 78-unit housing development in his own Upton-Druid neighborhood.

“He looked around and saw the need and

said, ‘Hey, why don't I do it?’” the younger Mr. Mitchell recalled. “So he went out and raised the money and saw it to fruition. He's the developer. He spent a lot of time at the construction site, making sure everything was just right.”

Even before his appointment to the University of Maryland Board of Regents two years ago, Mr. Mitchell — once an amateur boxer known as “The Shamrock Kid” — was a leader in the fight to establish an engineering school at Morgan State University.

Mr. Mitchell saw no conflict between his roles as Morgan advocate and as policy-maker for the University of Maryland, whose other regents want to see the engineering school located at its Baltimore county campus.

In fact, at a meeting of a committee advising state officials on where UM should estab-

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MITCHELL, from D1

lish engineering programs, Mr. Mitchell harshly criticized the university and its "historical policy of racial exclusion."

As a regent, he also criticized plans to toughen standards for admission to the university, and he was an adamant foe of what he called education's "over-reliance" on the Scholastic Aptitude Test and other tests used in college admissions. The proposed standards and such tests, he said, discriminated against black students.

"He and I had some go-rounds," said former Lt. Governor Blair Lee III, now a regent, "but we've known each other for so long that we could yell at each other and both enjoy it enormously. He was a persistent advocate for those things he believed in, and he had to be an advocate until the end."

Senator Mitchell recalled that his father had

turned in later life to taking his advocacy to the General Assembly, where he testified on various matters.

On the day of one of the winter's worst snowstorms, Mr. Mitchell managed to get to Annapolis to advocate the shift of University Hospital to a private corporation. Mr. Mitchell had crafted much of the legislation to assure a role for blacks in the operation and use of the hospital.

Mr. Mitchell was appointed to the city cable television advisory panel in 1982, and his was one of the votes that initially granted the city franchise to Caltec, of Baltimore county, over Cox Cable, of Atlanta.

When Cox lawyers criticized the panel's choice, Mr. Mitchell took the floor at a crowded Board of Estimates meeting, defended his vote and took the Cox "outsiders" to task. Such was the respect for

Mr. Mitchell that a Cox lawyer immediately apologized.

John J. Oliver, Jr., until recently chairman of the Baltimore *Afro-American*, was one of those who said yesterday that there is no one to take Mr. Mitchell's role as the city's dominant civil rights leader.

"Clarence always highlighted the plight of the black movement," said Mr. Oliver. "He involved himself in issues, not little groups and their squabbles."

Denton L. Watson of the New York NAACP office, Mr. Mitchell's official biographer, agreed. "He was a unique person for a particular period in history," he said. "He was a political diplomat, and there are few of those left. No one can replace him."

Both Senator Mitchell and another son, City Councilman Michael B. Mitchell (D, 4th) attended legislative sessions last night because, the senator said, "he didn't want us to sit around and mourn."

Michael Mitchell told the Council his family had received telephone calls from former President Gerald R. Ford, Vice President George Bush, the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, former Vice President Walter F. Mondale and Israeli President Chaim Herzog.

"The thing I remember most vividly about him was his standing up to [former Ugandan leader] Idi Amin," in a debate concerning Israel in the United Nations, Councilman Mitchell said. The late Mr. Mitchell served on the U.S. delegation to the United Nations during the administration of President Ford.

"My father felt that Israel represented hope for democracy in the middle of the Persian empire," Mr. Mitchell said. "He also believed that the legislative process was the surest process for making things happen in this country," he said, noting his father's efforts in getting the 1965 Voting Rights Act passed.

"My father was a consummate gentleman and a principled gentleman," he said.

Noting that his father could have led a quiet life after his retirement from the NAACP, the councilman added: "He attempted to get involved in his own neighborhood and push to build housing in his neighborhood. . . . He believed it was important to stay where you are."

Other Council members joined in praising Mr. Mitchell.

Reporter Ron Davis contributed to this article.