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OBITUARIES

Dr. Catherine R. Gira, a veteran educator and former Frostburg State University president, dies



By **FREDERICK N. RASMUSSEN**
THE BALTIMORE SUN | APR 08, 2019





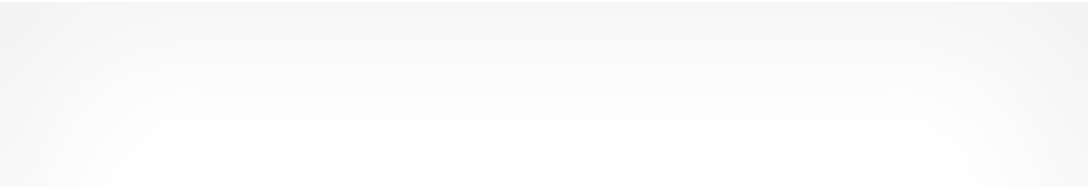
Catherine Gira began as a teacher of English and was devoted to reading and literature throughout her life. (Baltimore Sun)

Dr. Catherine R. Gira, whose career in education took her from a high school English class in Catonsville to University of Baltimore provost and finally president of Frostburg State University, died March 26 at Friends House in Sandy Spring from complications of injuries she suffered in a December automobile accident.

The longtime Columbia resident was 86.



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“Catherine was an amazing woman who had the ability to influence so many people, and her feedback was based on her own experiences,” said Dr. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, a longtime friend, who has headed the University of Maryland, Baltimore County since 1992. “And during our careers, we had both been deans, provosts and presidents. She had been a superb provost at the University of Baltimore and truly made Frostburg her home.”

Colleen T. Peterson, former FSU vice president, also lives in Frostburg.

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“She was the most wonderful person to work with and was a great influence on me, a young woman,” said Ms. Peterson. “Catherine was remarkable as a communicator and could bring people together. The end was always on her mind. She was absolutely brilliant.”

The former Catherine Marie Russell, the daughter of John Russell, a steelworker, and his wife, Mary Russell, a housekeeper, was born and raised in Fayette City, Pa.

She was a graduate of Charleroi High School in Charleroi, Pa., and earned a bachelor's degree in 1953 from California University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Gira obtained a master's degree in 1957 in education from the Johns Hopkins University, and a second master's degree, also from Hopkins, in 1972 in literature. She received her Ph.D. in 1975 in philosophy from American University, and also held a doctorate of humane letters from the University of Baltimore.

OBITUARIES

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APR 05, 2019 | 8:25 AM

In 1953, she began her career in education teaching English at Catonsville High School, and later became department chair. She also was an instructor in writing at the Johns Hopkins University.

She was married in 1954 to Joseph Andrew Gira, a Westinghouse Electric Corp. accountant, who died in 1976.

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She resigned from teaching at Catonsville to raise the couple's two children, and in 1965, joined the English faculty at the University of Baltimore. She later was named dean of the University of Baltimore's College of Liberal Arts and later provost in 1982.

While at UB, she was president of the faculty senate and was the first recipient of the Yale Gordon Endowed Chair for Teaching Excellence.

Dr. Gira left UB in 1991 when she was named president of Frostburg State University, the university's second woman president, and the only woman president in the University System of Maryland. .

"I was at her installation, and I remember her saying the college was built by the dimes and quarters collected from the local coal miners who wanted their kids to have a college education and a better life. This was moving from darkness into light," Dr. Hrabowski recalled.

"Darkness into light, that was the kind of person she was," he said. "She also liked to quote a phrase from Shakespeare's 'Henry IV.' 'By telling truth: Tell truth and shame the devil.'"

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"She always spoke truth, whether it was to those in power or the state, and when I think of her, I think of truth and light, and her phrase, 'while you live, tell truth and shame the devil.'"

Dr. Hrabowski said that "Dr. Gira never took herself seriously.

"She was a remarkably calm and strong woman, who had a great sense of humor, and was a problem solver," he said. "I had great admiration for her, and when you were in her presence, you were in the presence of greatness."

"I came in 1991 and I left in 2006, and she left shortly thereafter, so I was there for her entire presidency," said Ms. Peterson. "She was an extraordinary leader and person. She was a mentor in my work and in my life. She was a magnet for people and good work."

Her tenure as FSU's 13th president was marked by growth in its "infrastructure, reputation and

diversity despite weathering national economic downturns,” according to a university statement announcing her death.

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“Her tenure saw the completion of the Woodward D. Pealer Performing Arts Center (begun in a previous administration), the renovation of Gunter Hall, as well as the groundwork laid for the Center for

Communications and Information Technology, a building named in her honor in 2015,” the statement said.

Also, minority enrollment rose to 6 percent in 1991, and by 2006, nearly 20 percent, which made it one of the ‘most diverse campus in the University System of Maryland.

In 1997, Dr. Gira was inducted into the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame.

When she retired, Dr. Gira established the Catherine R. Gira Campus to Community Fund.

In her retirement, family members said, she continued to keep in touch with former students from UB and FSU.

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Some of her leadership roles included Leadership Maryland, Maryland Humanities Council, Maryland Women's Heritage Center, Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and the American Association of University Administrators.

She also served as president and a member of the board of the National Federation of State Humanities Councils and the Maryland Symphony Orchestra board.

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Dr. Gira wrote widely on William Shakespeare, including a critical study of "Henry IV" that was published by Garland Press, and art and literature of the Renaissance, as well as numerous articles on higher education.

A Columbia resident since 1968, Dr. Gira was an inveterate reader.

"We were always talking books and at heart, Catherine always remained a professor of literature and in an inspiring way," Dr. Hrabowski said.

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"We were going to a convention and we had an intense discussion about a book, so much so, I had forgotten about the navigation and we went 50 miles out of our way," he said with a laugh.

A memorial service for Dr. Gira will be held at 1 p.m. May 8 at the Wilde Lake Interfaith Center, 10431 Twin Rivers Road, Columbia.