

Dr. Rosetta M.T. Stith, longtime head of Paquin Junior-Senior High School, dies



Dr. Rosetta Stith stressed the need for mothers to nurture their babies. (Algerina Perna/Baltimore Sun)



By **Frederick N. Rasmussen**
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Dr. Rosetta M.T. Stith, former head of the nationally acclaimed Laurence G. Paquin Junior-Senior High School for pregnant teenagers and new mothers, died May 18 from complications of **dementia** at Woodholme Gardens Assisted Living & Memory Care in Pikesville. She was 72.

"At a time when schools did not accommodate young women who were pregnant, she got them to stay in school where they normally would have dropped out," said **Nancy S. Grasmick**, former Maryland superintendent of schools.

"She wanted them to get an education and at the same time learn parenting skills and skill sets — so when they left Paquin they could get a job. She wanted them to know that these things would effect the lives and future of their children," Dr. Grasmick said. "Her school was an incredible model for this, and she was such a go-getter."

City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke said that through Dr. Stith's work, "women in traditional school settings who became pregnant could come to Paquin and continue their education while getting prenatal

care."

"There was also maternity care so right after the birth of their babies they could bring them to a wonderful nursery at the school," Ms. Clarke said. "Her goals were good clinical support, hugs, healthy children and families. This is her legacy."

"Dr. Rosetta Stith was a powerful advocate for her students. When you saw them together it was evident there was a mutual love and respect," said city schools spokeswoman Edie House Foster in a statement. "She set a standard of intellect, elegance and excellence for all who knew her to emulate."

Known to many as "Doc," Rosetta Ma Theia Stith was the daughter of Elijah Stith, a laborer, and Edna Stith, a federal government employee. She was born in Baltimore and raised on Fayette Street.

After graduating from Edmondson High School, she obtained a bachelor's degree in elementary education in 1969 from Morgan State University.

In 1973 she received a master's in urban studies from the Johns Hopkins University and in 1978 a Ph.D. in education from Temple University in Philadelphia.

Dr. Stith was a lover of theater and initially considered a career on the stage. But city schools drew her passion, and she began teaching elementary school in 1969. She was named assistant principal at Paquin in 1974, then principal in 1980.

The Laurence G. Paquin School had opened its doors in 1966 at Fayette and Greene streets.

The idea for the school emerged in the early 1960s after a student at Clifton Park Junior High School became pregnant — and by law had to leave school. Clifton Park's then-assistant principal, Vivian Irene Washington, appealed to state, city and school officials to establish a school for pregnant teens in order that they could stay in school and finish their education.

Then-Mayor William Donald Schaefer was a supporter of the school. In a 1993 interview in *The Washington Post*, he said: "Once you have a baby you've got a responsibility for the rest of your life, and you can't expect somebody else to assume that."

The initial Paquin location outgrew its facilities and moved to the old City College-Western High School building at Howard and Centre streets. It moved again to the 2200 block of Sinclair Lane, where it remained until closing in 2010.

During her time there, Dr. Stith knew many of the teens she was trying to help at Paquin experienced shame, but in a 1990 profile in *The Baltimore Sun*, she explained her philosophy: "You made one mistake, don't make another. Stay in school."

Edna L. Harold, currently an assistant principal at Coldstream Park Elementary School, was in the 11th grade when she entered Paquin.

"When I went there, I was planning to drop out. When I walked through those doors I found [Dr. Stith] to be so, so inspiring," Ms. Harold said. "I went there wanting to be a secretary and she told me 'You're going to college.'

"She also taught me public speaking and told me to speak up for myself and my dreams," she said.

Kirrah A. Wilson, who came to the school as a ninth-grader, described herself as "a grateful Paquin alumni."

She said Dr. Stith was "a beacon of light for young women in Baltimore city, and she helped us become some of the best moms and the sophisticated women we are today."

"She is like a second mother. She was an awesome person and was so wonderful to me and my Paquin sisters," said Ms. Wilson, a 2007 graduate who now works for the city's Youth Works program.

Dr. Stith stressed the need for mothers to nurture their babies.

"I tell them this is the environment you give your baby: clean, safe, bright and loving. You love your baby," she said in the 1990 profile.

Dr. Misbah Khan, a pediatrician who recently retired as a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, served as Paquin's pediatrician for years. She recalled the school had a nursing center, a child care facility, a clinic for mothers and a school for children.

"She was dedicated to the well-being of the mothers and children of Baltimore city," she said. "Dr. Stith believed in self-sufficiency through education. Many of her girls went on to college and successful careers."

Shirley A. Cathorne, a veteran city educator and a longtime friend of Dr. Stith who lives in Pikesville, called Paquin "one of the most successful schools of its kind in the nation."

Dr. Stith appeared on "CBS Evening News," "NBC News," "The Montel Williams Show" and was also interviewed by The New York Times, Fortune magazine and others.

Her work earned her awards including the Howard L. Cornish Humanitarian Award from Morgan State University Alumni Association and the Governor's Citation. She was inducted into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame.

She was a resident of The Colonnade in the city's Tuscany-Canterbury neighborhood.

Ms. Wilson is organizing a candlelight vigil for Dr. Stith to be held 7:30 p.m. June 16 at the former Paquin School at 2200 Sinclair Lane.

A memorial service will be held at 3 p.m. June 17 at the Vaughn C. Greene Funeral Home, 8728 Liberty Road, Randallstown.

Dr. Stith is survived by a brother, Elijah M. Stith of Las Vegas, Nev.; a sister, Vanessa Johnson of Baltimore; and several nieces.

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