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## Ophthalmologist, rights leader John O. Brown dies

BY ANDREA ROBINSON

John O. Brown could mobilize a crowd for a cause. Among the causes he championed in South Florida were integration of public beaches and other public facilities, equal access in education and healthcare in black neighborhoods.

He fought for justice fueled with a strong belief that blacks should not be denied their God-given rights, granted by the U.S. Constitution to everyone.

Brown, the first black ophthalmologist in Florida and prominent civil rights figure, will mobilize a crowd one last time, as family and friends attend memorial services in his honor today and Wednesday. Brown died of heart failure Wednesday at North Shore Hospital. He was 84.

The Oklahoma native was born a leader, said daughter Gala Brown Munnings. In elementary school, Brown was shorter than most of his friends, but he compensated for his size in other ways.

"His mom would say he was smaller but he was smarter," Munnings said. 'He'd get in fights and come home and say 'I'm a fighter, yes I am.' "

Brown served as a commissioned officer in an all-black infantry division during World War II, where he was awarded a Purple Heart. During the war, he was wounded by German mortar shells.

A searing experience with racism in the 1940s girded him for other fights ahead.

On a trip to Nashville to visit his wife, Marie, Brown rode in an integrated train car from Chicago. But when the train arrived in Kentucky, the conductor ordered him to the back, behind the coal car. Brown refused.

Military police were called, but because of their lower rank they could not force him off the train. At the next stop, municipal police officers did, and threw him in jail.

"Here I am returning from war, and I'm treated like a second-class citizen," he recalled in a 2003 interview.

## **FOUR DECADES**

Brown attended medical school at Meharry Medical College in Tennessee. After residencies in general surgery and ophthalmology, he moved to Miami in 1955 and opened a practice that would last more than 40 years.

Outraged by the discrimination of the era, Brown, former state Sen. Jack Gordon and a biracial group formed a Miami branch of the Congress of Racial Equality. They started sit-ins at department stores and movie theaters and helped in protests to desegregate Miami's public beaches.

"We did some good work. Everything from where people can work, where they go, and where they can eat, we were involved," said fellow CORE member A.D. Moore, a retired assistant county manager.

Along with Rev. Theodore Gibson, Brown sued the Dade County School district in federal court to integrate several schools on behalf of their sons and four other children. He and Moore organized busloads of Miamians to attend the 1963 March on Washington.

Mindful of racial tensions flaring in the nation, Brown joined other religious and moral leaders such as Archbishop Coleman Carroll and Monsignor Bryan Walsh with the Archdiocese of Miami to form the Community Relations Board in 1963.

Brown used his connections with the white power structure to stave off some of the larger protests that occurred in other U.S. cities, said longtime friend Robert Simms.

"Because of his strength in boardrooms, the big civil rights movement never came to Dade County," Simms said.

Brown gained national recognition for his activism and was featured in the television documentary *Eyes on the Prize*.

For children and adults, visits to Brown's clinic were almost a rite of passage for anyone who needed cataract surgery or eyeglasses. The clinic started in Overtown and later moved to Liberty City.

"We'd joke we all got the same frame," said Nelson Adams, a local physician and president elect of the National Medical Association.

Brown was president of that group in 1986.

## **HE SET THE PACE**

"He was just a gentleman and a scholar. He set the pace for how to do things and do them with class," Adams said. "His legacy transcends healthcare. He knew he was

blessed in community service, civil rights. He excelled at all of them."

In addition to his daughter, Brown is survived by his wife of 63 years, Marie Faulkner Brown; son, John O. Brown Jr., six grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held 6 tonight at the Church of the Open Door, 6001 NW Eighth Ave., in Miami. Viewing will be held noon Wednesday at the church, with funeral service starting at 1 p.m.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to the John Ollis Lankford Brown Sr. scholarship fund for minority students at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

Donations may be sent to Medical Development and Alumni Relations, P.O. Box 016960 (R-100), Miami, FL 33101.

Miami Herald writer Andrea Torres contributed to this report.

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