

Dr. John Brister Turner

Dr. John Brister Turner was born February 28, 1922 to Virginia Brown Turner, an English and Art school teacher and Brister William Turner, a professor of English, on the campus of Fort Valley State College in Fort Valley, Georgia.. At an early age his parents moved to Atlanta, Georgia and then to A&M College in Normal, Alabama. At the age of nine, Turner's father died of injuries he incurred in World War I. The family which now included his sister, Peggye, returned to Atlanta where his mother, her sister and their mother reared the children.

Having received his early education in Atlanta and Normal, Turner attended Atlanta University's Laboratory High School where he was elected into the National Honor Society. Later received his college degree from Morehouse College from which both his father and grandfather had graduated. While at Morehouse, Turner majored in mathematics, sang in the Morehouse Glee Club and was a member of Kappa Alpha Psi. He played running guard in football and was on the All Southern Football Team. His college education, however, was interrupted in his last year by World War II.

During the last semester of his senior year, he enlisted and was accepted into the Army Air Corps for pilot training. While waiting to be called for duty, he was drafted into the Army. However, an Army officer encouraged him to apply for training in the Tuskegee Airmen program. Turner was one of only twenty-five men in his class of seventy-five to graduate from the program. He was trained to be a B-25 pilot, but his squadron was short of men. Victims of racism during this the period, Turner and his comrades were forced to wait a full year for the squadron to be completed with enough African-American men before they were permitted to fly overseas. By that time the War had ended.

Turner returned to Morehouse, but as a result of his experience while in the Air Force, he returned a changed man. Before the war, he had planned for a career in engineering. During the war, his observation of the social problems which plagued Afro-American communities caused him to want to do something to help change these conditions and so he was advised to enter the field of Social Work. His educational direction moved from a focus on things to a focus on helping people, particularly his own African-American people, solve the problems of health, jobs, housing and education.

Dr. Turner went on to receive both Masters and Doctorate Degrees from the School of Social Work at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Among his memorable experiences as a young professional, was his job working with boys at the YMCA in Atlanta and as a community social worker in Cleveland. Since then, he has held many professional positions in his career which seem a long way from his boyhood when he worked in a grocery store delivering groceries, cutting lawns in the neighborhood, scrubbing walls and floors, refinishing furniture and singing in night clubs.

Dr. Turner has served on the faculties of the School of Social Work at Atlanta University, the University of Georgia in Athens, and at Case Western Reserve University where he also served as Dean. In 1965 he received a Fulbright Scholarship to Egypt and led to many years of working in Egypt with the establishment of social programs throughout the country. In 1974, he received a Kenan Professorship at the UNC School of Social Work, becoming Dean of the School 1982-1992. He also served the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare as Director of the Egyptian Social Welfare Manpower, Training Project in Cairo, Egypt 1979-1981, and also as visiting professor and consultant at the University of Minya in Minya, Egypt. He served as a visiting professor and consultant at many other institutions in the United States and abroad.

Among many organizational duties, Dr. Turner was President of the National Conference on Social Welfare 1977-1979 and Chair of the Nominating Committee of the National Association of Deans and Directors of the Schools of Social Work Special Consultant for the Urban League. As an internationally recognized social worker, he established UNC School of Social Work's PhD program as well as its first development office. He attracted unprecedented resources and during his tenure, moved the School forward to its highest ranking of 12th among 120 U.S. graduate social work programs. He received awards for excellence in social work education from the National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education. He was also Editor-in-Chief of the 17th edition of the Encyclopedia of Social Work, one of the field's most prestigious publications.

Dr. Turner was recognized as a brilliant community service worker throughout his life. He had a special talent to negotiate programs to benefit and improve the university community as well as the civic community beyond. Former Dean of the School, Richard Edwards wrote, "His wisdom, leadership and tireless work ethic in innumerable roles across the UNC campus won him wide admiration and respect as one of the University's great leaders and visionaries".

Dr. Turner realized the great need for the School of Social Work to have its own building and worked for over a decade towards that endeavor, which culminated in the 1995 dedication of the Tate Turner Kuralt building on the UNC campus, sharing this accomplishment with the eminent late Jack Tate and Charles Kuralt. The building also

houses the Jordan Institute of Families which Dr. Turner established with a magnanimous donation from Michael Jordan and family. The research, training and technical assistance arm of the School, the Jordan Institute develops and tests policies and practices that strengthen families and engages communities. In 2007, the School of Social Work honored him with the establishment of the Sandra Reeves Spears and John B. Turner Distinguished Professorship for a leading scholar in the field who will “teach methods of working with families, engagement with community agencies, and promote the best practice models.”

John’s professional life never overshadowed his passion for fatherhood. He was an exemplary father--a great teacher with the patience of Job and whose wisdom and caring sensitivity to his children’s passing cares and woes throughout their lives was a like a rock of undiminishing support. Attitude in life, he preached, was the single most important element determining one’s success. The life of John’s family was always sprinkled with the infectious humor of his famous stories. People from all walks of life enriched their lives because of him. He loved people and they seemed to always return that love.

Dr. Turner is survived by his lovely wife, of sixty-one years, Marian Wilson Turner, whom he met when they were childhood playmates on the campus of A&M College. They later reconnected in Atlanta and realized their mutual love for people, family-- and for tennis! He is also survived by his daughter, Marian Turner Hopkins, son, Charles Brister Turner, grandson, Ian Turner Hopkins, sister Virginia Turner Dowell, son-in law ,Jonathan J. Hopkins and nieces, Jihan Abdur-Rashid, Ginger Dowell and many cousins, grand nephews and nieces, and great grand nephews and nieces.

The family would appreciate memorial contributions sent to:
The UNC School of Social Work, John Turner Doctoral Fellowship Fund
c/o The UNC School of Social Work Office of Development, CB# 3550
325 Pittsboro Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27599.

