

Obituaries

Norma Moseley, 75, housing rights activist

By Bryan Marquard

GLOBE STAFF

Traipsing through dingy buildings and fending off muggers in run-down neighborhoods were hardly what anyone would have imagined for Norma Moseley as she grew up in a life of privilege and private schools.

Drawn to social causes, she traveled south to civil rights marches in the 1960s, picketed segregation proponents in Boston, and made a career of ensuring that the elderly and disadvantaged kept their homes when times were tough.

So forceful was she in her advocacy that it was hard to say who was quicker to scurry at her approach — rodents in the decrepit buildings she examined or the well-appointed bankers and officials she harangued.

"Norma got indignant when she heard stories from clients, particularly when they got scammed or taken advantage of by lenders, contractors, and brokers," said Robert Pulster, executive director of the Ecumenical Social Action Committee, the Jamaica Plain agency from which Ms. Moseley nominally retired five years ago. "The angrier she was, the more intensely she would go after a solution for the homeowner. She would make it a personal mission to get some restitution for the homeowner."

Those crusades did not stop when she left the agency, where colleagues bought her a fax machine as a going-away present. With new cases always beckoning, she had little use for retirement. And it's not an overstatement to say that Ms. Moseley, who had suffered from serious lung ailments, had no time to spare for death.

"I wanted to take her to the hospital on Wednesday, and she said, 'No, I'll go on Friday,'" said her daughter Marcy Davala of Manchester, N.H. "She knew what she wanted, no ifs, ands, or buts."

Ms. Moseley was 75 when she died of pneumonia Sept. 16, the day after her daughter brought her to Lahey Clinic Medical Center in Burlington.

"She was fire and brimstone," said Mayor Thomas M. Menino. "Passionate wasn't the word for it. She loved to make people's lives a little better. Norma Moseley was someone who really made a difference for the people of this city. We'll miss her."

Raised in Darien, Conn., an affluent suburb of New York City, she strained at the conventional expectations of her home life and at Kent Place, an all-girls preparatory school in Summit, N.J., and went on to graduate from Radcliffe College.

"She was always out there trying to test the waters. 'Don't ever be afraid to be different' was one of her mottos, and she certainly lived up to that," her daughter Carol Wales of Alstead, N.H., said laughing.

"As an English major from Radcliffe, nothing had prepared me for my involvement in housing advocacy," Ms. Moseley wrote in the program for her retirement party at the John F. Kennedy Library in 2001. "I just knew how important having a place to call home was and is. I was idealistic enough to think I could overcome any obstacles to achieve justice for those who were threatened with the loss of their homes, early on with tenants, and for the last 25 years with homeowners."

She married, had four daughters, and lived in Reading, all the while trying to balance family commitments and activism. A pianist, she introduced her children to music, then took them to sing at nursing homes and to inmates in what was then the Charles Street Jail. Sometimes she dressed the girls in matching dresses, an homage of sorts to the Trapp Family Singers, her daughter said.

"I think we had a little trepidation — I don't know if we knew the word back then," her daughter said of the jail visits. "We sang to them with the pigeons flying over our heads."

In 1963, Ms. Moseley took part in the March on Washington and listened to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

"I wrote to my parents describ-

ing the event," Ms. Moseley later recalled. "I ended with, 'and now it remains to share with all the people I meet the fruits of this trip.' That watershed day has remained with me ever since, and what I witnessed has directed all my volunteer efforts and later my professional career fighting for justice. . . . That fight has evolved from my 'wild-eyed' radical days to a more modern-day moderated approach. But my commitment has been uncompromising, my dedication steadfast."

A few days before retiring in 2001, she summed up this devotion more succinctly in an interview with the Globe. "I'm a common scold," she said in a voice cured by cigarettes to an insistent rasp.

As with many activists, a fervent commitment to causes did not easily mix with personal relationships. Her marriage to her daughters' father ended, as did a second marriage. She moved from Reading to Wilmington when her daughters were grown.

"She really wanted her children to experience how others lived," Carol Wales said. "One time we experimented with a welfare family's budget for a month, and it wasn't fun. She would bring us into the city to see where some of her clients lived. We saw rat-infested tenements and children who didn't have enough to eat."

Ms. Moseley's solo ventures at night into these neighborhoods to check on clients came with a set of dangers that she shrugged off.

"I've been mugged, robbed, beaten four or five times," she told the Globe five years ago. "They wanted my pocketbook . . . they didn't get it."

Pulster, her colleague, said that while Ms. Moseley worked doggedly on individual cases, she also used that experience to address systemic problems. She coined the term "wise buy" — an approach that involved showing clients how to change their lives so they could keep their homes.

Deborah Briggs of Roxbury was one of the people Ms. Moseley helped with a housing issue.



GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2001

NORMA MOSELEY

"You know the saying about how you need to teach somebody how to fish? That's what she did," Briggs said. "It was tough to take. She was like, 'You've got to do this, this, and this to make things work.' It was tough going down, but at the end of it you had the tools you needed to go on."

Ms. Moseley received several awards for her work on housing, and upon her retirement the agency created an endowment fund in her name to promote programs that will continue her efforts.

"What I most loved about her was that she didn't feel sorry for anybody," Briggs said. "It was, 'OK, this is your issue, your circumstance. This is what you need to do.' She didn't necessarily hold your hand. She didn't baby you — 'Oh, poor you.' People don't need that."

Diminutive in stature — "she was probably all of 5 foot 1," Marcy Davala said — Ms. Moseley barely weighed more than 100 pounds.

"On her death bed, my sister Amy and I sang to her," Carol Wales said. "We sang some of the childhood lullabies and some Pete Seeger songs she taught us when we were growing up. I'm not sure if she heard it, but it was a special moment."

In addition to her two daughters, Ms. Moseley leaves two other daughters, Amy Wales of Montpelier and Sarah Wales of Andover, N.J.; and four grandsons.

Ms. Moseley did not want a memorial service. Pulster said friends are considering whether to hold a remembrance gathering.