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LOCAL

Ella Scarborough, former Mecklenburg commissioner and political pioneer, dies at age 75

BY WILL WRIGHT

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Ella Scarborough, former Mecklenburg commissioner, dies at age 75 JOHN D. SIMMONS *Observer file photo*



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Ella Scarborough, a longtime Mecklenburg County commissioner and the first Black woman to run for mayor of Charlotte and the U.S. Senate in North Carolina has died, her family said Tuesday evening. She was 75.

Scarborough, through decades of public service, became one of the most popular elected leaders in Mecklenburg County. She came up at a time of closed doors and closed minds to both women and Black citizens seeking political leadership roles and careers. As a teenager in Sumter, S.C., in 1963, she was arrested along with hundreds of other Black students who tried to enter a segregated movie theater.

Scarborough [began medical leave](#) from the county board as an at-large member in early February, following close to a year of [on-and-off](#) questions and public uncertainty about her health and engagement during meetings.

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Then, many past and current colleagues paid tribute to Scarborough's lengthy service in the public sphere, beginning in 1987 when she was elected to the Charlotte City Council, becoming the first Black woman to hold that position. She won a county commissioner seat in 2014. Before that, she ran but did not win elections for mayor of Charlotte and the U.S. Senate.

In response to news of Scarborough's health trouble in 2021, Hannah Hasan, a member of the Community Advisory Board to the Observer editorial board [wrote](#): "Ella Scarborough is a giant in our midst. More than a career public servant, she is reminiscent of warmth, of tenacity, of home. She's got big auntie energy and those of us in the Black community understand that auntie energy is a thing, sacred."

Several weeks after taking leave from her seat and county leaders began the process to fill the seat on an interim basis, Scarborough entered hospice care, Board of County Commissioners Chair George Dunlap said at the time.

Commissioner Pat Cotham said Tuesday night Scarborough often told a story of how she was born prematurely. At that time in South Carolina, the hospital was segregated and she was denied care.

Scarborough's father "made a big ruckus with the hospital and said he wasn't going to let his daughter die," Cotham recalled Scarborough saying. Eventually, the hospital broke its rules and gave Scarborough the care reserved for white children.

Scarborough said she "ended up integrating as a newborn," Cotham recalled.

"It set a tone for who she was," Cotham said, "and it showed that her father fought for what was right."

That story set the tone for much of Scarborough's life, from being arrested during civil rights protest in South Carolina as a young woman to serving as the first Black woman city council member.

"She was a trailblazer," Cotham said.

Dunlap on Tuesday recalled getting a call from a citizen shortly after Scarborough fell ill. The man had been dropped from a social services program and asked Dunlap for help.

"The last time I needed help, Ella Scarborough helped me," Dunlap recalled the man saying. "She made a lasting impression on people."

"The things that she was passionate about she was really passionate about," he added. "She was really passionate about the libraries. She was really passionate about helping people."

Dunlap also remembered Scarborough as a trailblazer in Charlotte.

"There was a point when Ella spoke, she spoke on behalf of the African-American community," he said.

Commissioner Leigh Altman wrote on Twitter that Scarborough “inspired me with her warmth, her tenacity, her trailblazing, and her lifetime of service.”

Scarborough is survived her two children, Troy and Tori; her siblings, Floydetta and Norman, and many nieces and nephews.

Funeral services will be handled by Chris King Memorial Chapel, 121 Mobley St., in Chester, S.C.



Remembering Ella Scarborough: Photos through the years

Ella Scarborough formally declared to run for Charlotte mayor on Aug. 10, 2001. She was the first Black woman to run for the post. JOHN D. SIMMONS *Observer file photo*

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