



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

JoAnn Watson, beloved Detroit leader, dies

written by Cheryl LaBash
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Cuba lost a good friend on July 10 when the Rev. Dr. JoAnn Watson joined the ancestors. Watson originated the call “Doctors for Detroit” with the late Rev. Lucius Walker, founder of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization.

The goal of her Dec. 9, 2006, Saturday forum featuring Walker was to utilize her office as a Detroit Councilmember to explore “opportunities for Free Medical Training in Cuba” at the Latin American School of Medicine, known for its Spanish acronym ELAM.



Cuba's historic leader Fidel Castro offered the scholarships during a Congressional delegation in 2000 when Mississippi Representative Bennie Thompson asked for Cuban doctors to help the people of his state. Every report on U.S. health outcomes ranks Mississippi at 49th or 50th. Black infant and maternal death are still genocidal even beyond Mississippi. In response to Thompson, Fidel doubted the U.S. would allow them to come, but Cuba would commit to training youth from the U.S. to be doctors at no cost and send them back home.

These scholarships are still available because IFCO Executive Director Lucius Walker forged a way to make it a reality in 2001. The application deadline is August 15 — email elamscholarship@ifconews.org for more information.



Today more than 220 Cuban-trained, debt-free doctors have returned to enter U.S. residency programs and serve the people throughout the U.S. Currently, three women are in Detroit hospital residency programs, and another is already providing first-rate, culturally competent, bilingual medical care in this city, plus more are in school now.

Detroit said goodbye to this beloved leader, unapologetically Black and Pan-African, on July 22 at a packed Fellowship Chapel. She was a teacher, mentor, radio host, grandmother, friend. The lifelong neighborhood friendships and ties that impacted her life included Rev. Dr. Wendell Anthony, NAACP National Board Member and pastor at Fellowship Chapel, who concluded the tribute to her life; the late Representative John Conyers, who authored the original reparations congressional resolution in 1989 — HR 40 to examine the merits of reparations to African Americans for U.S. slavery putting the issue and systemic racism represented by it, squarely on the national table, and the late Honorable Claudia House Morcom, who traveled indefatigably supporting freedom for the Cuban 5.



Watson authored a Water Affordability Plan and testified in defense of demonstrators arrested for blocking the contractors from shutting off water at the order of the appointed emergency manager. After the imposed bankruptcy, she retired from the City Council, continuing the fight in other arenas.

Ebony JJ Curry, Senior Reporter for the [Michigan Chronicle](#), wrote: “The memorial service for Watson was not merely a farewell. It was a shining beacon, a reflective mirror of the monumental influence this extraordinary woman wielded not only over the city of Detroit but within the pulsating heart of the Black movement in its entirety. Her spirit, her drive, and her unyielding commitment to justice were encapsulated in this gathering, in every tear shed, every fist raised, and every drumbeat that called us back to our roots. For in her passing, we did not lose a leader; we gained an ancestor whose memory will continue to inspire and guide us in the struggle for equality and freedom.”

At the time of her death, Watson co-chaired the Detroit Reparations Task Force initiated by the approval of 80% of Detroit voters for a 2021 ballot measure that called for the creation of a City Council Task force to study and address the issue of reparations for African Americans.

Watson had been scheduled to meet the Cuban ambassador last February during the Embassy’s Detroit visit but was prevented from doing so due to a scheduling change

at Wayne County Community College, where Watson taught classes.

We will forever hear her clarion call: Wake up, Detroit!

