

# **Puerto Rican Studies Dept., Dr. Danetta Sanders, has died.**

by **Chris Young**

"Let's be supportive!" An encouraging phrase, but for one very remarkable woman named Danetta Sanders, it was a way of life. She supported people and wanted them to communicate and understand each other. She especially tried to unite blacks and whites. Dr. Sanders died last June of natural causes, at the age of 72, after a life filled with a multitude of accomplishments.

Professor Sanders was born on August 3, 1907 into a unique Southern black family. Her father was President of Biddle College (now Johnson C. Smith University in South Carolina), an extraordinary accomplishment for a black man at the turn of the century.

Researching Dr. Sanders' life leads one through a maze of fascinating people who loved and admired her. Professor Bernice Samalois of Hunter College provided a list of Dr. Sanders' accomplishments and some personal recollections.

Dr. Sanders was interested in education at a time when blacks were excluded from colleges. In her early years she was a teacher and administrator in school systems in the 'deep south.' Prof. Samaloni noted that racial oppression was a regular part of Dr. Sanders' life in those early years. "She was once driven off the road and was barred from shopping in certain stores," Professor Samaloni said.

Dr. Sanders' contributions to Hunter College were also outstanding. She began as a lecturer in 1957, became an assistant professor in 1961 and retired in 1970 at age 63, as an associate professor. While at Hunter she sponsored the Education Club

from 1961-1969. The club was for students interested in becoming teachers. Since Dr. Sanders departure from Hunter the club too, has departed.

Dr. Sanders also coordinated the Field Experience Program which exposed students to the teaching field. From 1967-1971 she was assistant coordinator of student teaching.

The Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department provided background information about Dr. Sanders, as she was instrumental in founding the department. Dr. John Henrik Clarke, who worked with Dr. Sanders at the very prestigious Schomburg Library for the Research of Black Culture in Harlem said, "Dr. Sanders worked consistently on the early development of the Black and Puerto Rican Studies here. Her main strength was curriculum development and structure of courses. She wanted to have substance, not just propaganda. The students however, were more interested in politics and consequently the meetings were unruly, but Dr. Sanders stayed with it until this

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department had a definite direction.”

Dr. Clarke noted that Dr. Sanders was an avid collector of books on the Black experience and had an excellent collection of first edition books by Martin Delany, considered by many to be the father of Black Nationalism. She also had unusually good sense when it came to collecting black artifacts.

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## *‘Let’s give people a chance to grow’*

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Bertina Hunter, co-worker at the Schomburg Library, spoke about Dr. Sanders art collection. Dr. Sanders was one of the first people to support both Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff, renowned black artists. Ms. Hunter, the first to serve on the Art Commission of the City of New York, said about Dr. Sanders, “Everybody loved her; they loved seeing a person like her. She was the first to support the great black artists long before they were famous. She was naturally elegant, a grand lady in every sense of the word. She was commanding and compelling—a great source of inspiration, even Mr. Draton listened to what she had to say.”

James Draton, President of the Board of Directors of the Schomburg Library, had this to say about Dr. Sanders, “I had a fantastic affection for her! Her most important commitment was in spending a great deal of time supporting the library. No job was too big or too small for her. She couldn’t do enough for the cause. She spent hours collecting memorabilia and

trying to get support and assistance. She was phenomenal."

Outside Hunter College, and in addition to work at the Schomburg Library, Dr. Sanders was a member of the Harlem Women's Auxiliary in 1972, and also a member of the Harlem Culture Society.

In 1971 she went on sabbatical, and toured African Universities, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda. In 1970 she was on the Board of Directors of the Rod Rodgers Dance Group. Dr. Sanders was a member of the American Association of University women and lectured on "Preparation of Teachers for the Disadvantaged Urban Areas." She was a member of the Executive Committee of the New York State Association for Student Teaching, from 1960-1967, President of the organization from 1968-1969, and also established the New York State Chapter.

Gordon Feifer, a colleague of hers described Dr. Sanders as "interested in education and higher education. She was very active and effective in sponsoring the Education Club. When the college converted to open admissions, she was active in providing counseling for the black students. Her major strength was helping to retain open communications between the black and white communities. She was very successful with both students and faculty groups."

"Let's give people a chance to grow" was a favorite phrase of Danetta Sanders. Her teaching did not end on the last day of class or even on the last day of her life. Dr. Sanders' work and activism will continue to reach people for generations to come.

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