



## Dolores Marsalis

July 18, 2017

Dolores Mary Ferdinand Marsalis passed away in her home on July 18, 2017. She was born in New Orleans, in 1937 to the late Leona Learson and Delfeayo Ferdinand. She was a New Orleanian, a Creole Catholic through and through, and lived with her family in the St. Bernard Housing Project. She received her B.A. from Grambling State University in 1960. On New Year's Eve in 1959, she married Ellis L. Marsalis Jr., a jazz piano player. Maybe an odd choice at the time but after all as Ellis said, "she was one of the few girls who that I knew who actually liked jazz."

In the small town of Kenner, Louisiana, their family grew quickly; four sons born in six years, and an additional two sons by 1977. She dedicated herself to six boys by making sure they all knew how to read before they started first grade. Given the time and place in which they lived, it was no doubt a smart move.

In 1968, after MLK was killed, she made the decision to send her black and tan Catholic sons to the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Elementary School where they lived in Kenner, instead of the one in the city because "it was time" for Us, for the state and for the country. So, they went and for each day she ensured that whatever was available to be had, was had and the nonsense of the times was greatly constrained.

Her tenacious and clever advocacy went far for her fifth son, who was diagnosed with special needs two years after his birth. During a time when few services existed for autism and when difficult to diagnose problems with

children were often blamed on the mothers, she made sure her son developed his own remarkable potential.

Her experience as a mother empowered her as a woman. On the macro level, she supported many women's causes, and on the micro level, she supported many more, woman-to-woman. Frequently she would talk of the influential women of her youth; namely the Nuns of the Sisters of the Holy Family, who operated St Mary's Academy as well as Prof. Fidelia Johnson, "Mama Fi", her major professor at Grambling State. Over the years, many a woman would recount how special she was to them and how much she helped them see things and to remark "She told me how it is", "She really helped me believe in myself." Sometimes they would say, more so than their own mothers.

One of the more unique parts of her was her funny bone. It was a sudden wit and humor that would present itself no different than a strike of lightning. If you had ever thought you could get the best of her, you were quickly reminded that you had not. But the absolute best of her was her paradoxical love for those who have been brought low, by life, by circumstance, by mishap, or even by their own hand. She would help those in trouble financially, and she would often lend an ear of support by letter, postcard or phone call whether you were in your home, hospital, jail, or just waiting for your next place. Other than her husband, few if any would know of the scope of her ministrations. This was her sweet spot. If you were low, she was your best friend, if you were high, she would bring you low so she could be your best friend. Not one to favor pity - she could sniff this out with the best - over actually helping you by getting you to help yourself. She would not tolerate "foolishness" or self-pity, if you needed a shoulder to cry on it was there, but only for a minute before you would get the "Now let me tell you something...". And there you would have it, what you needed to do.

Her advice given, reaffirmed her belief that we ALL had the wherewithal to get back up. She was never far from what was in front of you. She was the crucible that made better men and women whether they liked it or not. The

moment may have been hell, but in hindsight her best gift was revealed. Being the matriarch of what would become a famous family of Jazz musicians should have been the lede, but for her it was not. That note would be reserved for the second paragraph. If you came to her to talk about her famous husband or sons it would not have been a very long conversation. If you wanted to talk about what you were doing, what you were interested in and how you were making it in the world, she was all ears. Such is how she prioritized matters, how she weighed the world. A casual perusing of the comments left behind in her sophomore yearbook from Grambling State in 1958 confirms what you know and think of her:

“Dearest Dee, Your lovely face and pleasant smile will perhaps be remembered by those with whom you have been acquainted long after we have all gone from our “Dear Ole Alma Mater” not because they have done us a great deal of good but because you were the person in whose possession they were. No other person can and could have given me more justice. Stay as sweet as you are.”

And there it is – words as a picklock to the soul of the soul of her.

Dolores Mary Ferdinand Marsalis is survived by her husband Ellis, her six sons Branford, Wynton, Ellis III, Delfeayo, Mboya and Jason; and 15 grandchildren.

A final viewing will be held at D.W. Rhodes Funeral Home Chapel, 3933 Washington Ave on Monday, July 31, 2017 from 4:00 pm to 8:00 pm.

Her Mass of Christian Burial will be held at Mater Dolorosa Catholic Church, 1230 S. Carrollton Ave. on Tuesday, August 1, 2017 at 1:00 pm with visitation from 11:00 am to 12:45 pm. Father Herbert J. Kiss, Jr., Principle Celebrant.

After the service her sons and the many grandchildren will accompany her to Mt. Olivet Cemetery, where she will be laid to rest.

And from there those who have laid her shall carry the best of her forward in the soul of the soul of them.

Arrangements by D.W. Rhodes Funeral Home. Please visit [www.rhodesfunera](http://www.rhodesfunera)

l.com to sign the guestbook.

# Cemetery Details

## Mt. Olivet Cemetery

4000 Norman Mayer Ave.  
New Orleans, LA 70122

# Previous Events

## Visitation

AUG 1. 11:00 AM - 1:00 PM (CT)

Mater Dolorosa Catholic Church  
1230 S. Carrollton Ave.  
New Orleans, LA 70118

## Service

AUG 1. 1:00 PM (CT)

Mater Dolorosa Catholic Church  
1230 S. Carrollton Ave.  
New Orleans, LA 70118

# Tribute Wall

HU

“ To the beautiful Marsalis family I received a call from Chicago yesterday afternoon regarding the passing of Delores. She was , indeed , a beautiful woman whom I met In the 60's at Grambling ;via, a former classmate of hers at St. Mary 's Academy, Joycelyn . Delores would come to Joycelyn's room frequently wanting to borrow a hat or gloves and Joycelyn would say, " Dee ! Call Ellis Marsalis and tell him what you want ...with your poor self ! " Then Joycelyn would tell me about Ellis being a musician and teacher. I was a music education major and accompanied the college choir . Dee was in awe of me and would say , "You are just the nicest girl from Chicago ! Stay nice...don't be like us , we're bad ! 💕 I spoke to her once or twice while visiting NOLA after she was married. Joycelyn would say what a wonderful mother and wife she had become. When her children were becoming famous and I heard that last name, I knew that this was Ellis and Dee's family. I was , indeed , honored to have met Wynton after a concert in Orange County , CA maybe eight years ago ! We sat right on the front row ( center). I have always savored that evening ! And I never met but did have an opportunity to visit the Center while in your city. Saw And heard Ellis performing at an event celebrating Louis Armstrong four or five years ago, Delores will always hold a special place in my heart ! God bless all of you !  
Henrietta CORBIN Underwood'

---

Henrietta Corbin Underwood - September 17, 2017 at 05:19 PM



“ I am so sorry to hear about the loss of your mother, and for you Mr. Marsalis your wife. I remember many many years ago when I was living in New Orleans (and a lot younger) I would sometimes run across her in a grocery store or department store. She would always ask me "And how are those girls" (my children). She was very thoughtful, caring, pleasant and fun to talk with. I am happy to have met her and hope that the Lord will comfort your hearts during this time.

*Leon Aguilar  
Plano, Texas*

---

**Leon Aguilar** - August 19, 2017 at 08:17 PM



“ I was saddened to hear of the passing of Dolores Ferdinand Marsalis, or “Dee”, as she was called when I first met her in 1956 when we were both freshmen at Grambling State College. My fondest memory of her is how she thrilled the audience at the Freshmen Talent Show as she sang “Someone to Watch Over Me”. She had a very beautiful voice and, apparently, she found someone to watch over her. My thoughts and prayers are with the entire Marsalis family, and I will never forget her.

*Faye Evelyn Melvin Piller  
St. Louis, Missouri*

---

**Faye Melvin Piller** - August 16, 2017 at 11:27 AM



“ My deepest condolences to you and your family,,,,,

*Spike Richardson  
Germany*

---

**Spike Richardson** - August 10, 2017 at 02:50 AM