

Former Amherst GOP chairwoman dies at age 65

COURTESY OF CAROL GRAY Paulette Henderson-Brooks with her husband, H. Oldham "Harry" Brooks.

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AMHERST — During the 2008 presidential election, Paulette Henderson-Brooks served as president of the Amherst Republican Committee. At the same time, her husband, H. Oldham "Harry" Brooks, led the Amherst Democratic Committee.

"It was like they were the (James) Carville and (Mary) Matalin of Amherst," said Robert Weiner, a lifelong friend of Harry Brooks and a Washington, D.C., political consultant. "They loved being known for that."

Henderson-Brooks, who was also a Town Meeting member and active in town affairs during the decade she made Amherst home, died Thursday in Virginia Hospital Center-Arlington, Virginia.



An attorney for the federal Department of Homeland Security, Henderson-Brooks, 65, was heading to a work-related conference in the nation's capital when she suffered a stroke, Weiner said.

Calling hours will be Tuesday from 4 to 8 p.m. at Mercadante Funeral Home and Chapel, 370 Plantation St., Worcester, with a funeral Wednesday from the funeral home, with a Mass at 10 a.m. at St. Mary Church, 114 Princeton St., Jefferson. Interment will be Thursday for the immediate family.

"We've lost a valued member of our community," said Isaac BenEzra, a Town Meeting member and host of the Amherst Media program "Conversations."

"This is a woman who was not only a mother and grandmother, she gave unselfishly to whatever she did." BenEzra said he got to know Henderson-Brooks when she was president of the Amherst Community Television board of directors.

After raising her three children and following the death of her first husband, William, in 1996, Henderson-Brooks attended Mount Wachusett Community College, then Smith College, where she was an Ada Comstock Scholar graduating in 2002, before receiving her law degree from the Western New England College School of Law. She also studied abroad in England at the University of Oxford.

She first opened up a law practice to deal with immigrant concerns before being tabbed for the federal government position.

Though Henderson-Brooks and Brooks, who were married in 2003, moved to Maryland for her federal job, they returned to the central Massachusetts community of Holden last year to be closer to her family.

Weiner, who served as one of two best men for Brooks at the couple's wedding, said Henderson-Brooks' career blossomed in Homeland Security.

"She advocated for the oppressed and those who deserved fair rights," Weiner said. "She was on the humane side of Homeland Security."

This focus on the less fortunate was also evident in her work in Amherst, where she was co-chairwoman of the Community Development Committee, which attempted to find funding for projects that met the needs of low and moderate-income residents.

She also volunteered with Serve New England, a nonprofit that sells food to members at low prices as long as the members perform two hours of community service per month.

She was on the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition and participated in many Amherst League of Women Voters activities.

Carol Gray, a Town Meeting member and former public defender, said Henderson-Brooks was “a voice for the voiceless.”

“I was really struck by how much she cared about immigrant rights and people who had no advocate,” Gray said. “She just felt it to her core when people were in need.”

Weiner said Henderson-Brooks put her character of being a gentle, warm and smart person to good use, observing that if other Republicans acted this way on a national level it would go a long way to ending gridlock in Washington. Even in a heavily Democratic town like Amherst, Henderson-Brooks, campaigning for a Town Meeting seat, proudly advertised that she was a Republican on her literature.

“She was so honest you couldn’t help but vote for her,” Gray said.

In a 2009 interview, Henderson-Brooks addressed the need for discussing and debating all ideas.

“We all want what’s best for our communities,” Henderson-Brooks said at the time. “We just differ sometimes on how to get there.”

BenEzra said he expects that a memorial service in Amherst will be held sometime in the future.