

## **Pensal McCray who led 3,000 minority scholars to college, has died.**

**By Joanne Davidson**  
***The Denver Post***

Had it not been for the Ethnic College Counseling Center that Pensal McCray and her husband, Christophe, started in Denver in 1983, some 3,000 young people might not have ever made it to college.

The McCrays started the ECCC after receiving a startling bit of news that her eldest child's high school guidance counselor had told daughter Talia, an honor student, that she wasn't eligible to apply for college scholarships. Refusing to believe that - and realizing they probably weren't alone - the McCrays set out to prove the counselor wrong.

Talia McCray, who went on to receive a doctorate and become a Fulbright Scholar, is an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

"Our mother lived a very full life," Talia recalls. "And she died doing what she loved to do. You just can't ask for anything better than that."

Pensal Winston McCray was found dead in her bed on Jan. 18, with materials for an upcoming tour of historical black colleges and universities spread out beside her. She was 71.

In addition to helping students negotiate the college application process and find financial aid, she led the college tours every other year.

Civil rights attorney Anne Sulton described her longtime friend as "a giant among giants." She said the full impact of McCray's contributions won't be fully realized for at least another decade. "That's when we'll really start to see how well those stones were polished."

McCray, who was born in Chicago on Jan. 23, 1942, trained as a classical pianist at the Jeanne Fletcher Mallette School of Music in Chicago and as a teenager served as pianist and director of the youth choir at St. James AME Church located next door to the family home. She has three college degrees: an undergraduate degree in education from Bennett College in Greensboro, N.C., and advanced degrees from Ohio State University and the University of Northern Colorado.

She met her husband, who died in 2007, when he was a student at the Illinois College of Optometry.

"They courted by letter for 18 months before marrying on Aug. 28, 1962, the year before she graduated from Bennett," Talia said. "He wrote her a letter a day."

Bennett's director of alumnae affairs, Audrey Franklin, remembers Pensal McCray as "a dedicated 'Bennett Belle,' who not only sent her daughters (to Bennett) but encouraged other students to attend, as well. Once they were here, she continued to mentor them to ensure they graduated with a good experience."

Shayla Moon, regional field organizer for Creative America, had returned to Denver in 2002, after serving in the U.S. Air Force, with the idea of resuming studies at either Spelman College or Howard University.

"My great-aunt, Ruby Kirk Gray, had made up her mind that I needed to be at Bennett College," Moon said. "And when Mrs. McCray invited my aunt and me to her home, she led off with the question: 'Young lady, what is your purpose?' I did not have an immediate answer, and that set the groundwork for Mrs. McCray to advocate for me to transfer to Bennett and start what became an exposure to tradition, refinement and opportunities that I would not have received elsewhere."

While she was at Bennett, McCray was one of the students taking part in what would become a six-month sit-in at a Woolworth lunch counter that began on Feb. 1, 1960. A picture of her at the lunch counter is part of an exhibit at The Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

The McCrays settled in Denver in 1972, after living for 3½ years in Misawa, Japan, where Christophe was stationed with the Air Force. He later established a private optometry practice in Colorado. Pensal McCray, who was active in the NAACP and Denver Sister Cities International, was the recipient of the Denver Public Library's 2006 Juanita Ross Gray Award; the 2007 Minoru Yasui Community Volunteer Award; and the 2012 Women Making History Award from Colorado Black Women for Political Action. In 2007, the McCrays were named Parents of the Year by the Colorado Parents Day Council.

In addition to Talia, McCray is survived by four other children: Dr. Monique McCray-Osley, an emergency room physician with Kaiser Permanente in Washington, D.C.; Christophe L. McCray, who has a doctorate in physics and works for the Institute for Defense Analyses in Alexandria, Va.; Dr. Rispba McCray-Garison, a major in the U.S. Air Force who practices family medicine in San Antonio; and Demetrus McCray, a sports trainer in Atlanta. She also leaves two brothers, Legrain and Hollies Winston, and 11 grandchildren.