



**Geneva Hayden  
Community Organizer  
2009 Racial Justice Lifetime Achievement Award  
Community Wide Dialogue to End Racism  
InterFaith Works**

In 1994, Geneva Hayden retired from her twenty-five year career as a teaching assistant at Danforth School. "What's next?" she thought, and launched her second "career" as a community organizer. She first developed CURN, a grassroots community action organization to respond to the needs of residents of the Midland Avenue, Furman Avenue, and Kennedy Street. Seeing children without the needed adult supports, she started driving children to school when the parents failed to do so. She met with the young men who hung on the street corner, plopping her lawn chair in their midst, and listening to their despair about finding a summer job. A summer car wash grew in her driveway, the youngsters using her hose and buckets to make some pocket money for the summer. Next, she opened her living room to community children, building a free library and after school program.

As the word spread, her work spread, including the creation of Kwanzaa Park in an abandoned lot across from her home. This park became a focal point of pride for the neighborhood and included a community garden where each child could have a little bed of vegetables and flowers, while learning about nature, and creating beauty in the neighborhood. "Beauty strengthens and inspires," says Geneva. After participating in the Central New York Community Foundation's Neighborhood Leadership Training, she learned about power dynamics, and "became empowered," building a sitting area with a mural fence through her grant from them.

As the work grew, the need for community collaboration was apparent, and Ms. Hayden wove a network of organizations together to support the neighborhood. She got support from Syracuse City School District and moved the after school program to Beard School, pulled in her colleagues from Danforth, got Betts and Beauchamps Library, which became the headquarters for the weekly reading program, and now a new math tutoring program. Syracuse University sent grant writers, and student mentors, and three Presbyterian Churches in Marcellus, Little Falls, and Syracuse and the Methodist Church in N. Syracuse gave support, as did the Gifford Foundation.

In the last few years, Ms. Hayden's work has morphed into Light a Candle for Literacy, a year-round program that supports adult and child literacy and parenting skills throughout Syracuse's south side, culminating in a summer parade and festival. Literacy is broadly defined in this amazing effort, not just limited to reading, writing, math, and using a computer. Literacy means feeling connected to the village, seeing oneself as responsible for one's family and the village, being able to navigate the larger community, learning how to return to the village to share the gifts that have been given. She's now building a parenting program with Peace, Inc.'s Project Connection.

Geneva has been married to Al Hayden for forty-five years, and together they have four children, Cheryl, Ronnie, Kevin, and Randy. She has seven grandchildren and three great grandsons.

"Throughout my life, I have tried to teach people that they are valued and to open the doors of opportunities. One of the mom's from our neighborhood with two little boys is getting her nursing degree at OCC, we've got kids in college now who come back and say 'thanks for saving my life.' My next project is employment, helping our neighborhood establish day cares, become teachers, and one day, ***BURYING THE WORDS "I CAN'T" AND REPLACING THEM WITH "I CAN!"***".

Community Wide Dialogue to End Racism thanks Geneva Hayden for giving her life and work to the creation of racial equality, and we are proud to honor her with the 2009 Racial Justice Lifetime Achievement Award.