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Major Owens, 77, Education Advocate in Congress, Dies

By **JOSEPH P. FRIED**

Major R. Owens, a former librarian who went to Congress from Brooklyn and remained there for 24 years, fighting for more federal aid for education and other liberal causes, died on Monday in Manhattan. He was 77.

His death, at NYU Langone Medical Center, was caused by renal and heart failure, his son Chris said. Mr. Owens lived in Brooklyn.

Mr. Owens, as a state senator and a former chief administrator of New York City's antipoverty program, was a prominent figure in Brooklyn when he won the House seat vacated by the retiring Shirley Chisholm in 1982. Fourteen years earlier, she became the first black woman elected to Congress.

Mr. Owens represented an overwhelmingly Democratic swath of the borough that included Crown Heights and parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville, Flatbush and Park Slope. The district encompassed stretches of severe blight and poverty, along with areas of middle-class stability and pockets of affluence.

He viewed education as "the kingpin issue," as he put it in an article he wrote for the publication *Black Issues in Higher Education*. "We have to believe that all power and progress really begins with education," he wrote.

As a member of the House committee that dealt with education, Mr. Owens spent much time sponsoring and shaping measures to put more federal money into reducing high school dropout rates, hiring more teachers and improving library services. Many of his provisions became parts of wider education bills.

In 1985, he wrote parts of a successful bill that authorized a \$100 million fund to strengthen historically black colleges. In a hearing on the legislation, he said the fund was needed because "most of the historically black colleges are struggling." He recalled his own days at one of those institutions, Morehouse College in Atlanta, from which he graduated in 1956.

“Most of the youngsters there were poor, from very poor backgrounds,” he said, and Morehouse “played a vital role of nurturing.”

Mr. Owens, who was considered one of the most liberal members of the House, opposed an agreement between President Bill Clinton and Congressional Republicans to give states more flexibility in how they spent billions in federal school aid.

“We cannot leave it up to the states,” he said. “They have not done a good job.”

On other fronts, Mr. Owens was a floor manager of the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, aimed at curbing discrimination against handicapped people. He defended organized labor and supported proposals to prohibit the deportation of illegal immigrants who fell into various categories.

Mr. Owens, whose first wife, the former Ethel Werfel, was white and Jewish, frequently urged blacks and Jews to bridge their differences.

He condemned the Nation of Islam as a “hate-mongering fringe group” after anti-Semitic remarks by its leader, Louis Farrakhan. Even before tensions between blacks and Hasidic Jews in Crown Heights erupted into riots in summer 1991, he denounced the “Rambo types on both sides” who, he said, only poured oil on the strife.

Mr. Owens was a low-key politician, but he had a colorful streak; he wrote and even performed rap lyrics, for example. He titled one number, about male sexuality, “The Viagra Monologues,” a takeoff on the name of Eve Ensler’s play “The Vagina Monologues.”

Other lyrics, which he performed in open-mike sessions at cafes and entered into the Congressional Record, dealt with goings-on in Washington. One rap number commented on a 1990 budget accord between Congress and the White House. Here is how it began:

At the big white D.C. mansion

There’s a meeting of the mob

And the question on the table

Is which beggars will they rob.

Major Robert Odell Owens was born in Collierville, Tenn., on June 28, 1936, to Ezekiel and Edna Owens. His father worked in a furniture factory.

In 1956, the year he graduated from Morehouse, Mr. Owens married Ms. Werfel. The marriage ended in divorce. He later married the former Maria Cuprill.

After earning a master's degree in library science in 1957 from Atlanta University (which later became Clark Atlanta), Mr. Owens moved to New York City and worked as a librarian in Brooklyn from 1958 to the mid-1960s.

He was executive director of the Brownsville Community Council, an antipoverty group, until Mayor John V. Lindsay appointed him to oversee the city's antipoverty program in 1968 as commissioner of the Community Development Agency, a post he held until 1973.

Mr. Owens was a state senator from Brooklyn from 1975 until 1982, when he won the Democratic primary for Ms. Chisholm's House seat. In a district so heavily Democratic, the primary victory was tantamount to election.

His opponent in the primary, Vander L. Beatty, also a state senator from Brooklyn, was later convicted of forgery and conspiracy in seeking to get the result overturned.

In his 11 campaigns for re-election Mr. Owens faced significant opposition only twice, in 2000 and 2004, when his primary opponents contended, to no avail, that he was no longer attentive to the needs of his constituents, especially the many of Caribbean origin.

He retired from Congress in 2006. His son Chris lost in a four-way primary race to succeed him.

Afterward Mr. Owens taught public administration at Medgar Evers College, a Brooklyn branch of the City University of New York. His book "The Peacock Elite: A Case Study of the Congressional Black Caucus" was published in 2011.

Besides his son Chris, from his first marriage, Mr. Owens is survived by his wife; two other sons from his first marriage, Millard and Geoffrey, an actor who appeared on television as the son-in-law Elvin on "The Cosby Show"; three brothers, Ezekiel Jr., Mack and Bobby; a sister, Edna Owens; a stepson, Carlos Cuprill; a stepdaughter, Cecilia Cuprill-Nunez; four grandchildren and four step-grandchildren.

