

NEWS

For Immediate Release

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Honoring a life: Amiri Baraka (1934 - 2014)

On behalf of the City of Orange Township, I extend my heartfelt condolences and prayers to the family of Amiri Baraka: a legendary poet, village leader, community father and role model for a generation of Americans, including myself. Mr. Baraka was a mentor, role model and a friend to so many of us when I was growing up in the South Ward of Newark. I call upon his example regularly as I approach my duties as Mayor of Orange with fairness and compassion. My lasting memories of Amiri Baraka are of a man who took time to share his life experiences with me, challenging me with his powerful words and by his personal example.

Amiri Baraka carried a passion for justice that manifested itself in his art, his oratory and above all, his actions. Because he did not shy away from controversy in pursuit of freedom, we are better off today because of his courage. The former poet laureate used his voice to speak for the voiceless, and he was a relentless critic of the privileged and powerful. Like the Biblical prophet Elijah who challenged the kings of his day, Amiri Baraka spoke inconvenient truths to the leaders of our time—whether they wanted to hear it or not.

Every elected leader of my generation and the one before can trace their political roots back to Mr. Baraka's efforts in organizing the historical Black and Puerto Rican Convention in the mid-60s. That meeting produced the first African American Mayor in a major northeastern City. The Ken Gibson mayoral run in 1966 and his eventual election to the office of Mayor in the City of Newark in 1970, served as the gateway and training ground for two generations of elected officials and political leaders like myself. Baraka was the organizer and we owe him a debt of gratitude for his vision of political empowerment.

Amiri Baraka's audience went beyond Newark, his beloved city, and even beyond New Jersey. His voice echoed on the streets of distant lands, wherever and whenever prejudice, hate and injustice reared its head. And although his voice is stilled, Amiri Baraka's words will live on in the hearts of all those who were blessed to hear them.

I will miss our village leader and friend.