



OBITUARIES

Darius Swann, whose fight to enroll his son led to school integration in N.C., dies at 95

 Obit Darius Swann

West Charlotte High School students leave a bus in Charlotte, N.C. A man whose challenge to the notion of segregated public schools helped spark the use of busing to integrate schools has died at his Virginia home. The Rev. Darius L. Swann was 95. (Harold L. Valentine/AP)

By ASSOCIATED PRESS

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The Rev. Darius L. Swann, whose challenge to the notion of segregated public schools helped spark the use of busing to integrate schools across the country, has died at his Virginia home. He was 95.

The Rev. David Ensign, interim pastor at Burke Presbyterian Church, where Swann's family attended church, confirmed that Swann died March 8.

Swann's wife, Vera, told the Washington Post that her husband died of pneumonia.

On Sept. 2, 1964, Swann wrote a letter to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., school board, asking that his son James be allowed to attend Seversville School, two blocks from his home, rather than the all-black Biddleville School, which was more than twice as far away. He was allowed to argue his case at a subsequent meeting of the school board, which suggested that the Swanns enroll James in Biddleville, then request a transfer.

The Swanns said no thanks.

“We figured that the system was really protecting segregation,” Swann said in an interview in 2000. “What they wanted to do was decide things on a case-by-case basis, when what they needed to do was change the whole system; there was a systemic problem.”

Enlisting the support of local activist Reginald Hawkins and civil rights attorney Julius Chambers, Swann sued the school system in January 1965. While they pursued their legal fight, the Swanns enrolled James and his younger sister, Edith, in a private Lutheran school.

After one year there, the Swanns moved their children to Eastover, a public school in the affluent, predominantly white Myers Park neighborhood of Charlotte, N.C.

Chambers continued the lawsuit even after the Swanns moved to New York, where he and his wife worked at Columbia University, and later to Hawaii before moving to India, where he researched Asian theater.

“Sure he got tired of it,” Chambers said of the lawsuit. “He had difficulty understanding all the opposition and how mean people could be, but he never to my knowledge ever thought about bailing out.”

In 1971, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld court-ordered busing in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, clearing the way for the use of busing as a means of desegregation across the nation. Swann learned of the decision while he was in a mountain village in India and read about it in a newspaper.

At the time, Swann said he had no regrets about the long legal battle he endured on behalf of his children and children across the country.

“I felt that schools were a means of our becoming one society,” Swann explained.

“Perhaps I was overly optimistic, but I still think it’s a significant factor.... We have to

have an integrated society in order to be one, and if we don't have an integrated society, we will continue to be two people, separate, unequal.”

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