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Harlem Environmental Activist Cecil Corbin-Mark Dies At 51

A "giant of the environmental justice movement," Corbin-Mark helped lead the Harlem-based group WE ACT until his sudden death on Thursday.

By Nick Garber, Patch Staff

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Cecil Corbin-Mark was a lifelong Harlem resident who rose to prominence as Deputy Director of the nonprofit WE ACT for Environmental Justice. (Courtesy of WE ACT for Environmental Justice)

HARLEM, NY — Cecil Corbin-Mark, a leading environmental advocate from Harlem who organized communities to push for health protections and climate action as deputy director of the group WE ACT for Environmental Justice, died on Thursday after suffering a stroke. He was 51.

The announcement of Corbin-Mark's death Friday morning sent a shockwave of sadness through the city's political and activist communities.

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Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer [called](#) him "a giant of the environmental justice movement," who possessed "a wonderful ability to organize, and a keen sense of how to get projects done."

Colleagues from WE ACT praised his role in the passage of environmental protection laws, his wide-ranging knowledge of policy and his kindness toward others in the movement.

Corbin-Mark was a lifelong resident of Hamilton Heights, where his family had lived for nearly a century, according to his [biography](#). His relatives had deep ties to the Civil Rights movement, including his great aunt and uncle, Dorothy and Louis E. Burnham, who helped found the Southern Negro Youth Congress after moving to Alabama from Harlem.

He graduated from Hunter College with a degree in political science, later earning an M. Phil. in International Relations from Oxford University in the U.K., where he studied the political traditions of the African diaspora in the Americas.

Corbin-Mark joined the Harlem-based WE ACT not long after its inception in the late 1980s and spent the ensuing 26 years with the group, helping it grow into a major player in the environmental justice movement.

Corbin-Mark assisted in the passage of a slew of environmental justice laws, from lead paint regulations to emission reductions targeting climate change, a WE ACT spokesperson said. He advocated at City Hall and the State Capitol, and [testified](#) before Congress in July about the health risks of climate change.

Outside of work, he helped run summer basketball teams for neighborhood youth and mentored formerly incarcerated teens through the Friends of Island Academy.

"It cannot be overstated what a painful loss this is to both WE ACT and the environmental justice movement," the group [wrote](#). "His leadership and advocacy improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, not just in Harlem but all across the country."

Basil Seggos, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, said his department was "devastated" by Corbin-Mark's death, and called him a dear personal friend.

Corbin-Mark is survived by his mother, Winnifred Corbin, his father, Luces Mark, his "second mother," Merlyn Corbin, his Godson, Nigel Holder, and other family members, WE ACT said.

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