



**National  
Urban League**

**To Be Equal #24**

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**Ruby Dee Exits the Stage but Remains in Our Hearts**

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*"The kind of beauty I want is the hard-to-get kind that comes from within: strength, courage, dignity."* Ruby Dee

In the past several weeks, two remarkable African American women artists took their final bows. In the midst of mourning the May 28 passing of Dr. Maya Angelou, we learned that last Wednesday, June 11, the great actress and activist Ruby Dee died at her home in New Rochelle, New York. Both Maya Angelou and Ruby Dee used their incomparable talents to reshape our notions of beauty, womanhood and race. They also inspired millions of people around the world with their extraordinary wisdom and dignity. Everything about Ruby Dee was an expression of a lifelong dedication to human rights, racial equality and social justice -- from the roles she portrayed to the causes she championed, even to the man she loved and was married to for 56 years, actor Ossie Davis. Though her physical presence is no longer with us, the larger than life impact Ruby Dee had on the stage, screen and the public consciousness will live on forever.

Known widely for her 1959 Broadway and 1961 movie roles as Ruth Younger, the wife of Walter Lee Younger, as played by Sidney Poitier, in "A Raisin in the Sun," Ruby Dee's acting career spanned more than six decades and earned her numerous awards, including an Emmy, a Grammy, an Obie and a Screen Actors Guild Award. In 2008, she was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her portrayal of Mama Lucas, the mother of Denzel Washington's character, Frank Lucas, in "American Gangster." In 1995, President Bill Clinton awarded her and Ossie Davis the National Medal of Arts. She also won widespread acclaim for her 1950 portrayal of Rachel Robinson, the wife of the first Black major league baseball player in "The Jackie Robinson Story." She and Ossie Davis also had notable roles in several Spike Lee films including "Do the Right Thing" and "Jungle Fever."

Ruby Dee's elegant and tenacious presence radiated as much off the stage and screen as it did on. She and Ossie Davis, who died in 2005, were civil rights and social justice activists who supported and worked alongside Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. This unique husband-wife team even served as master and mistress of ceremonies for the historic 1963 March on Washington. They were both long-time members and supporters of numerous

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civil rights organizations. In 1970, the New York Urban League honored Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis with its prestigious Frederick Douglass Award. In 1986, the National Urban League presented them both our Equal Opportunity Day Award, and in 1985 at the National Urban League's 75th anniversary Founders Day program, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis served as key program participants, sharing poetry and reflections of Urban League history.

In 1998, the couple published a joint autobiography titled, "With Ossie & Ruby: In This Thing Together," an epitaph that will adorn the urn that will hold both their ashes. According to the Washington Post, in 2008, Ruby Dee described the epitaph to Jet magazine: "If I leave any thought behind, it is that we were in this thing together, so let's love each other right now. Let's make sense of things right now. Let's make it count somehow right now, because we are in this thing together." That was not only the key to the remarkable marriage of Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis; it is a lesson for us all.

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