Fred Easter, who helped countless Black students access higher education, dies at age 81

Easter died in September, about three years after he was diagnosed with cancer.

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Fred Easter devoted his days to improving the lives of Black people. Often that meant helping students access higher education. Sometimes that meant supporting a grocery store in a food desert or joining a podcast with members of his historic class at Harvard University.

"Fred clearly has a legacy of probably thousands of people whose lives he touched, who when I say touched, he didn’t just touch. He really had an influence," said Joe Nathan, a former student who remained in contact with him.

Over the course of his eight decades, Easter held a variety of titles: instructor, dean, coach and father, among others. Easter, 81, of Prior Lake, died in September, about three years after he was diagnosed with cancer. A memorial service will be held in the chapel at Carleton College on Nov. 5.

Easter’s intellect set him apart at an early age. He skipped two grades and graduated from high school at 16. While a counselor encouraged him to get a job, Easter’s parents were determined to help him become the first person in their immediate family to go to college.

Easter was one of the first Black students to attend a prep school called the Gunnery and then went on to join a barrier-breaking class at Harvard University. While the elite school had in the past accepted one or two Black students at a time, Easter was part of a group of 18 Black men to start their studies there in 1959.

"It was a fair amount of pressure. We were 18 guys representing the whole kind of Black population," said Kent Garrett, a classmate who chronicled their experiences in a book called "The Last Negroes At Harvard: The Class of 1963 and the 18 Young Men Who Changed Harvard Forever."
Those who knew Easter said his years at Harvard helped shape his views on education. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he led a crucial division for A Better Chance, a program that helps high-achieving children of color access quality schools. He held a litany of roles at Carleton College, including serving as an associate dean, Black activities director and one season as a basketball coach.

Easter believed that education could transform people's lives "but it had to be the right kind of education," said Nathan. Easter pushed them to think critically by asking pointed questions like: How would taking over a building at Carleton College reduce the Vietnam War by a single day or a single hour?

"Fred's enormous legacy was: Take constructive action. Build alliances. Make a difference. Don't be satisfied with symbolic gestures," Nathan said.

Easter sought to create a supportive environment both for his own daughters and for the many students he worked with over the years. When Warren Simpson struggled in his early days at Carleton College, Easter told him about his own struggles at Harvard, how he had taken time off and later returned and graduated.

"That was very motivating to know that if you get knocked down, you can get back up, dust yourself and stay in the game. That was very inspirational to me," said Simpson, who went on to become a successful lawyer and shares Easter's lessons with his own mentees.

Over the years, Easter also worked for a program supporting students interested in math, engineering and science, and another training Black students to work on computers. For years, he led The City Inc., a non-profit organization that ran alternative schools, offered after-school programs and provided social services programs.

"His commitment to those kids, his passion for what he was doing was just extremely strong," said Simpson, who served on the group's board.

Easter volunteered for political campaigns. He frequently joined a podcast with Garrett. He had also been hoping to work on a project opening grocery stores in food deserts.

"In some ways, I think just the need kept him going," said his daughter, Allison Easter. "He just looked at the world and saw what was going on and was trying to make it better."

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Liz Navratil covers Minneapolis City Hall for the Star Tribune. She previously worked in Pennsylvania, where she covered state government and crime — and sometimes both at once. She was part of the team that won a 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Reporting.