

An Appreciation of Juanita Tyler

December 13, 1932–November 5, 2012

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It is with great sadness that the *World Socialist Web Site* reports that Juanita Tyler, the mother of Louisiana frame-up victim Gary Tyler, died November 5, 2012, just shy of her 80th birthday, in St. Rose Parish, near New Orleans. The Socialist Equality Party extends our deepest condolences to the Tyler family and our appreciation of this enormously courageous woman.

According to family members, Gary Tyler, 54, was allowed to see his mother during her hospital stay and also attended the funeral. The last days in the hospital were one of the rare occasions when Juanita saw her son without a police escort and shackled legs, prompting her to ask Gary if he was free.

Tyler remains incarcerated in the notorious Angola State Penitentiary after serving more than 38 years for a crime he did not commit. His continued imprisonment is one of the greatest injustices in modern US history.

I first met Juanita and the Tyler family in May 1976, shortly after learning about the case of Gary Tyler, a 17-year-old black teenager who was then the youngest person on death row in the United States. I was part of a reporting team from the Workers League and the Young Socialists (forerunners of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality) who visited Juanita at her home in St. Rose parish to discuss the details of Gary's case.

Tyler, a student at Destrehan High School, was arrested at the age of 16 on October 7, 1974. On that day, the school bus he and other African American students were riding was attacked by a white mob, whipped up by the Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke and Democratic and Republican politicians in response to court-ordered school desegregation.

Tyler was accused of the shooting death of 13-year-old Timothy Weber, a white student in the crowd. From the moment of his arrest, however, he was the victim of

a carefully prepared police frame-up.

The alleged murder weapon—which was not found during initial police searches of the school bus—turned out to have been a stolen pistol from a police firing range. It later “disappeared.” Witnesses who gave statements against Tyler recanted them, saying they had been threatened by police.

In that first meeting with Juanita I was struck by her strength of character and will to fight. While emotionally shaken by the gross injustice that had taken her son from her, she maintained her composure and did everything possible to organize a struggle to win his freedom. On the day we arrived in St. Rose we participated in a Mothers Day march she had organized with signs and pickets through the neighborhood.

Juanita Tyler, who had received no support from the NAACP, the official civil rights organization, explained the events of that fateful day when Gary left the house for school, never to return.

Juanita proceeded to tell us how she rushed to the police station when she learned that Gary was arrested after the shooting at the high school. While she was at the station, she heard cries from her son who was being interrogated by police. When she was finally allowed to see him, it was clear from the swelling across his shoulder, neck, legs and back he had been brutally beaten.

Juanita was told by police to leave the station and that her son would be brought home later. That never happened. The very next day, October 8, 1974, the news wires carried the story that Gary had been arrested. The charge—murder in the first degree of Timothy Weber. If convicted, he faced death in the electric chair.

Gary was then kept in prison until he turned 17, to be tried as an adult. The trial opened on November 5,

1975, with the presiding Judge being Ruche Marino, reportedly a member of the White Citizens Council, a “respectable” version of the KKK. The trial lasted only nine days and Juanita Tyler was never even allowed into the courtroom.

Gary’s attorney, Jack Williams, put up no credible defense and was more concerned about collecting legal fees than representing Gary. The family did all they could to mobilize support with limited resources.

The Workers League and Young Socialists (YS) fought to mobilize the support of the entire working class to demand the freedom of Gary Tyler, explaining that his frame-up was not simply the product of racist politicians but part of an attack on the working class as a whole. Like Gary, we warned, workers and young people fighting to defend their social and democratic rights would be subject to similar frame-ups and state violence—a prediction that has been borne out in the subsequent decades.

Juanita not only welcomed the campaign of the YS but actively participated in this work. A week after our initial meeting she attended the Fourth National Congress of the Young Socialists held in Detroit on May 14-15 and addressed over 400 conference delegates.

She understood the broader implications of Gary’s arrest and did not see it simply as an example of “Southern justice.” Her message to the delegates assembled at the conference was, “It could happen to you tomorrow or today so don’t let down in your struggle.”

Over the course of the next several months, the Young Socialists members collected over 40,000 signatures demanding Gary’s release. We organized a powerful demonstration in Harlem, New York of hundreds of workers and young people.

Tyler’s life would only be spared when the US Supreme Court struck down Louisiana’s death penalty statutes. Nevertheless, he is continuing to serve life imprisonment even though there is no longer any legal basis to keep him in jail. The Louisiana Board of Pardons recommended pardons for Tyler on three separate occasions—in 1989, 1991 and 1995—only to have Democratic and Republican governors refuse to take action and set him free.

Juanita expressed the best of the working class. She was a woman of strength and tenacity who fought in

the face of great odds. The mother of 11 children, she worked tirelessly for her son’s freedom while caring for her family. She never gave up fighting until the day she died.

Juanita grew up in a small, racially segregated town in Louisiana, lived for a period in New Orleans and in 1970 moved with her husband Uyls to St. Rose, Louisiana, about twenty miles upriver from the city. Uyls died in 1989.

I had the pleasure of visiting Juanita Tyler again last year, along with a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the SEP who had read about Gary’s case.

After all these years, she treated us with warmth and friendliness, and was very happy that there was still great interest in Gary’s case and a new generation of young people wanting to fight for his freedom. She explained to us that she was in regular contact with Gary, speaking to him often. She expressed her pride that Gary had remained steadfast and kept himself physically and intellectual sharp because she was sure one day he would be free.

Upon learning of Juanita’s death, Niles Williamson, who accompanied me on the visit, said, “It was inspiring to see that she had sustained the will to fight after confronting a criminal justice system which is determined to keep Gary in prison. Juanita did not show any signs of the cynicism and resignation that one might expect in the face of such adversity. Workers should look to Juanita as an example of how to remain firm.”

We encourage our readers to send messages of condolence to Gary Tyler at:

Gary Tyler #84156
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Angola, LA. 70712



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact