

The lioness, the oak tree, the matron: In loving memory of my mother, Helen Halyard

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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard given by her son, Jamal, to a memorial meeting for Comrade Helen held by the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the International Committee of the Fourth International on December 3.

I thank everyone for attending today and want to start by remarking on the tributes before me. It's been incredible to see the glimpse of Mother's work laid out so patiently by her friends and comrades. In conjunction with this sentiment, I'd like to start with a small story and some advice Helen gave her niece Valorie upon the passing of Helen's former mother-in-law, Ruth. Valorie explained that she regretted never getting the chance to meet and connect with her grandmother adequately. After a lengthy conversation, my mother told Valorie, "It is never too late to get to know someone."

In conjunction with the political sentiments expressed before me, I want to speak about the things I hold dear about my mother, many of which you have also experienced and know to inform her political work and are informed by it. Mom is not the kind of person you can separate from her struggle alongside the working class. Her memory has wide branches and deep roots, which will grow even more profound. Our shared moments in the past and in the future will connect us.

Mom is not the kind of person you can summarize completely in mere words. She is so much more than that for the movement, me, and many of us personally—as successful in her personal life as she was in her political. Mom was strong even while carrying the burden of tragedy and is living proof that the adversary only makes a monster when one chooses to succumb to it, and that was not my mom. Easy was not her way and often not her choice. Not a single person here will have it easy, yet Helen prevailed and survived, and so can we. With a lifetime of tragedy on her shoulders, she found the time to carry those around her, saving us, and, unequivocally, me.

Adopting a seven year old is no easy task, but mom took it in stride. Without her, I would, without a doubt, not have become the person I am now. She would spend countless nights giving me the motherly attention I never had and would push me from being nearly illiterate to English being my most passionate subject.

I remember that when I was 12 there was a student who was struggling to adjust to school in a way like me; her name was Brittany. It was the first time in my life that I felt the calling of kindness, which is what I now call it. Mom found out that I was taking time with this young girl to help her with classwork and protect her from her classmates emulating those things she did with me. The action felt effortless, and it felt good. Neither Mom nor Dad could have been prouder. I know why, and hold this calling as one of my most prized personal traits.

As a young adult, I found myself cast adrift in the world with no real direction and in need of a firm shove out of the nest. Mom and Nancy here today did that for me. I was offered an opportunity to join the Farmington Hills Fire Department as an emergency medical technician and firefighter. When I was lying in bed, nearly paralyzed with sore muscles from the training, Mom was there to offer her help. I knew in those moments that I had all the support in the world. With mom behind my back, what couldn't I achieve?

This is the job I call my own now. I take every opportunity to treat every patient like I did in Brittany not so many years ago. All of this is an effort that I might positively impact the current state of the world, left so hurt by the greed of so few, just as she did. She nurtured this drive in me; I can only imagine how deeply she must have inspired you all here today.

We must take this time to remember Helen Halyard. This is not to say that Mom is an easy woman to forget, mind you, she's far from it. But she tailored her interactions with all of us to have a personal touch, and, as

such, we all know her in a slightly different hue from the woman she was in life.

She was born in New York in 1950—a time in New York when, it cannot be overstated, how difficult yet formative it was for Mom. She would develop a deep connection to family after the passing of her brother, and would later expand her definition of family to include almost anyone. She would be sent to visit distant relatives in the deep South, and while down there she would discover a passion for colonial-era history, and, later, politics. She would also learn, “You can take the girl out of the city, but you can’t take the city out of the girl.” The loss of her family when she was so young and her trips to distant relatives would combine to form some of her most outstanding traits—an utterly unstoppable purpose, compassion and understanding.

She went on to spend much of her free time bridging the gap between lost family members, and would even go on to meet people who were cousins so distant that you’d need a chart to figure out the relation. She kept up with these contacts and cherished them deeply.

Party members have their own stories on what brought them to the doorstep of their political views. But I think some things ring true. An individual like Helen—with a deep love of people and passion for justice—came to fight for a healthy, united working class.

Mom’s sense of right ran deep and prevailed in many of her interactions. She could not stand by and watch injustice befall innocent people, and I remember my Mom felt very passionate about the homeless. She told me once that she strongly disagreed with the image that is portrayed of the homeless, and that they were not scoundrels but people who needed help, that the system as it is had failed them. All the while, she would stop the car and give \$5 from her purse to the man begging for change—a trend I carry with me today. I understand it now. It’s something I need to bring myself to do. It’s something I want to do. It’s effortless for me to help, and I know that it is for Mom, too.

Her political work focused on the hands-on approach, meeting people in person and traveling to different places. She would connect with many people and inspire many more to share her political views, from being involved in the trial of Gary Tyler to the simple yet essential task of keeping in touch with party supporters. Mom worked for a better future for the working class, and today, the crowd gathered is her magnum opus.

From her magnum opus to her Mona Lisa, our mother, friend, aunt, sister and confidant was wonderful. She was

the kind of person at gatherings of friends and family who would effortlessly strike up a conversation with new people or people from out of town, the kind of person you find on the sideline of the get-together. Mom would glide their way, and after a few moments they would talk like they’d known each other for years. The special treatment wouldn’t end there. If you ran into her weeks or even a decade later, she would bring up that conversation like it just happened. And it wasn’t just shy people at parties. No one was safe, from random strangers on airplanes to taxi drivers in New York. If the world was Mother’s oyster, the people were her pearls.

Mom was not known as a pushover either. Sitting at the other end of the table from her in an argument is an experience that would surely test your resolve. Only for you to learn in the process, she helped you make up your mind along the way. However, when she made up her mind, it rarely changed. As a young adult, I felt Helen’s drive was a weakness; it was the sign of someone who made up their mind too quickly. As I approach 30, I carry her lessons and ideals, with much more to learn. I learned that the world is an ebb and flow and riptide. If I can decide and put it to task, I can swim when some sink.

Like the wind bends a tree so that it can grow to be strong, Mom was that for many of us. Often, what we needed was only sometimes what we wanted. But with Mom, you always got what you needed. Sometimes you would only discover this much later, and I’m sure, even now that she is not with us, she will be taking me to school for many years to come.

It wasn’t all stern and intense with Mother. If you needed that shoulder to cry on or vent over a few glasses of wine, Mom was there. Mom was there if we needed someone to help us with homework or to call and check on an autoworker. Mom was there if you wanted to go thrift shopping or listen to music. Mom was there when you needed a babysitter or someone needed to be on the picket line. Mom was there when we lost our moms, and Mom is here with us now, a living memory forever cast in a grand mosaic of several hundred people’s lives and countless more. A tapestry akin to the Detroit Industry Murals by Diego Rivera. We were all saddened to see her go, but we rejoiced that she was here.



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