

Hundreds pay final respects to Dorothy

By PETE DALY
Staff Writer

TRENTON – Hundreds of mourners gathered yesterday to bid their final respects to Dorothy Vaughn Palmer, the city matriarch, longtime educator and mentor to area youth who was the driving force behind the ascent of her son to the city mayorship.

Dorothy Palmer, a lifelong Trenton resident known as “Dottie” to both friends and strangers, died Tuesday at Capital Health System at Mercer following a lengthy battle with pancreatic cancer. She was 78.

Magnanimous yet direct, Palmer was an educator who was entrenched in civic activism throughout most of her life, offering advice to urban youth while giving her opinion to political leaders.

And so it was fitting yesterday that politicians and religious leaders were separated from Palmer’s old neighbors and former students only by the pews at Shiloh Baptist Church on Calhoun Street, where her extravagant but poignant funeral service was held.

“Dottie was always a fighter, but more than that she was a lover -- a lover of people,” said David Dinkins, the former mayor of New York City and a lifelong family friend who grew up with Palmer on Spring Street. “I’m truly grateful to have known such a wonderful woman.”

Dinkins called Palmer “lively, adventurous, outspoken and spirited,” qualities he said helped her will her son, Doug, to become Trenton’s first black mayor in 1990.

In a powerful eulogy following comments from Dinkins, family members and friends, Shiloh Baptist Church Rev. Darrell Armstrong urged mourners to follow Palmer’s legacy of optimism and hope.

“When we look at this stately woman, it behooves us to remind ourselves that she had a certain regality about her,” Armstrong said from the pulpit, which was surrounded by dozens of brightly-colored flower arrangements.

“She was vivacious, effervescent. Even in the midst of pancreatic cancer, she would always have a smile on her face. In a world filled with brokenness, chaos and confusion, she was always a positive spirit,” Armstrong said.

Speaking to Palmer’s family, Armstrong urged them to have faith in sorrow. “You had a light in the midst of your lives that left you an example of not only how to be a good citizen or a good elected official” but a loving family member as well, Armstrong said.

Earlier in the service, Palmer’s cousin, Richard Cook, described her determination.

“She was someone who knew who she was, knew where she came from,” Cook said. “She knew where she wanted to go, and she knew how to get there.”

Palmer was educated in the Trenton public school system, graduating from Trenton Central High School in 1945 before earning a bachelor of science degree in physical education from Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio.

While in college, Palmer was initiated into the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and later spent more than 25 years as an advisor to teens through the sorority. Dressed in black, scores of her sorority sisters filled Shiloh yesterday and held an early-morning tribute in her honor.

Palmer returned home and earned a master’s degree in education from Trenton State Teachers College (now

The College of New Jersey). Her career in education lasted 28 years, as a guidance counselor and physical education and health teacher in the Hamilton Township school district.

Palmer’s unwillingness to compromise when the subject was children -- she also knitted hats for hospitalized children and was an avid supporter of the West End Little League -- was even more pronounced when those children were her own.

“No matter where he was, whether in (Little League) baseball or in politics, she was (Mayor Doug Palmer’s) advocate,” Armstrong said.

“Mrs. Palmer reminded me so much of my own mother,” Mercer County Prosecutor Joseph Bocchini said. “She was a lioness who looked over her cubs without fear.”

Other local officials also offered their condolences yesterday, including Hamilton Mayor Glen Gilmore; Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes; U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine; state Sen. Peter Inverso (R-14th District); Mercer County Freeholders Pat Colavita, Keith Hamilton, and Tony Carabelli; former county executive Bob Prunetti; and West Ward city councilwoman Annette Lartigue, among others.

But perhaps the most touching remembrance was included in letters read to the mourners before services ended with Palmer’s burial under a heavy snowfall at Greenwood Cemetery in Hamilton.

Among letters from former President Bill Clinton and one from Capetown, South Africa, was a note from children at the Mercer County Children’s Medical Daycare, which read, in part: “To The Family: We are going to miss your mom.”