

BROWARD MAYOR'S SUCCESS A TRIBUTE TO LATE FATHER

Written by Al Calloway
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FORT LAUDERDALE — From the time she was a little girl, Barbara Sharief followed him everywhere. "Unless he had to go out of town, one of us, usually me, was always with him," Sharief says of the spiritual family man who was father to her and her three sisters and four brothers.

James Sharief's eight children and his wife of 28 years enjoyed a good life because he worked seven days a week and did well as a self-employed merchant.

Sharief's father knew how to negotiate and buy wholesale. "He mainly sold dresses from racks in his white truck situated mostly at Jumbo's, a popular restaurant in Liberty City [a largely black neighborhood in Miami]," she recalled in a recent interview. "The truck had only one passenger seat and my oldest sister and I would tussle to ride with my father."

While Sharief was in third grade, a teacher wanted her placed in a special education class because, during a test, which she finished, she went to the window to watch kids playing. After further investigation and testing, it was found that she was actually bored. She was placed in the fourth grade for a while then moved to the fifth grade.

Barbara Sharief was 14 years old and in the 11th grade when horror struck the family one Saturday. That day she lost out to her elder sister Felicia for the ride from Miami to Fort Lauderdale with their father, who wanted to test the market in that city. While he was setting up his truck and tables, a 15-year-old boy stuck a gun in his chest. "He told my father to put his hands up, which he did," Sharief recalled. "My father said, 'Take whatever you want. I've got eight kids.' That's when the boy shot my father one time, in the heart."

When the boy killer realized there was a witness, he began shooting in Felicia's direction. A woman nearby pulled Felicia down under a table as the shooter ran away.

"I answered the phone when the police called for my mother," Sharief recalled. "We were taught to be obedient so I gave her the phone. My mother stumbled and we caught her."

At the hospital, James' widow Bobbie, their children, aunts and friends were told that the man they all loved was dead.

"That changed the course of my life," said Sharief. "I was top of my class and always wanted to go to medical school. I wanted to be a pediatric physician." Her father always told her that he would make that a reality. Now he was gone.

"Now my mother was single with eight children. She had not worked outside of the home for 26 years," Sharief said. "She had been married to my father for 28 years." Before that and until two years into the marriage, her mother had been a school teacher. "My mother had no idea how to get back into the workforce."

The family struggled, losing their comfortable home in North Miami to foreclosure and their cars but they made it "with the help of federal assistance for awhile and my father's Social Security [benefits]," Sharief remembered. "My mother got a job as a secretary and, at 15, I got a job in a retirement home in restaurant management. I ended up running the kitchen and doing the books."

Barbara drew strength from her father's example. She was determined to find a way into the medical field even though he was no longer around to help make her dreams come through.

Sharief got into a school program in which she went to classes from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. and worked up to 10 at night. "I graduated high school at 15 and a half and went right into then Miami-Dade Junior College and got in the nursing program," she explained. "I took 20 credits or more each semester so I could finish fast and help my mom with my younger brothers and sisters, especially a brother who was health challenged."

In 1992, at age 18, and after nearly two years at the Jackson Memorial Hospital School of Nursing in Miami, Sharief passed her Registered Nurse boards, becoming one of the youngest to do so in Florida's history. "I didn't know that then," she said. "I just did it because I had to."

As a Registered Nurse (RN), Sharief worked at Jackson, mainly in organ transplants and the Intensive Care Unit. "I also worked all over and had great experiences at Jackson," she said.

Beside continuing to help her mother, Sharief saved her money and, at 26, bought her first house. With a schedule of alternate three and four 12-hour days on and off at Jackson, she got into home healthcare and soon word got out that she did good work. "I got offers from everywhere," she said.

After three years working for one firm, Sharief struck out on her own. In 2001, she launched Florida Pediatric Homecare (FPH) with her mother as secretary. "By then, I wanted my mother to work if she wanted to, not because she had to, which was my father's vision," she said.

During her first year of business, Sharief hired 30 nurses. "I did all the contracting – I had developed great contacts, people knew me and my work," she said.

The second year, she doubled the number of nurses. "By my fifth year, I had 205 nurses on staff," she said. At present, FPH has more than 600 nurses and therapists and owns locations in Pembroke Pines and in Miami.

Sharief's mother is now retired and Felicia takes care of staffing at FPH while another sister Rosalyn handles billing; the business' founder trained both.

But success brought with it a dark cloud. News reports said audits uncovered Medicaid fraud in billings by FPH. Sharief said it was all a misunderstanding but she made a business decision to pay assessed fines rather than spend money and time litigating the issue.

More recently, there have been additional news reports that Sharief is being accused of ethics violations regarding her financial disclosures. The reports said the complaints have been referred to the Florida Commission on Ethics and a hearing is scheduled for April 25. These all show a suspicious pattern that is only to be expected if you are a woman and a so-called minority.

Sharief, 42, also entered politics, winning election as a city commissioner in Miramar and, later, a seat on the Broward County Commission. Last year, she made history when her commission colleagues elected her county mayor, the first black woman to hold the position.

Most recently, Sharief was selected as one of five honorees for the 22nd annual African American Achievers celebration, sponsored by JM Family Enterprises Inc. and slated for April 9 at the Broward County Convention Center in Fort Lauderdale.

Last year, as Broward County vice mayor and second vice president of the Florida Association of Counties, she received that organization's Presidential Advocacy Award for her work during the 2013 Florida Legislative Session.

Sharief is married to Maxwell Chambers and they have five children. She received a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science degree from Florida International University. She is an Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner and has qualifications also in nursing administration, nursing research and clinical nursing.