

## Marie Tarver, Woman of the Year 1982



Over the last 53 years, Marie has been a vitally important part of Dutchess County, NY. As a teacher and leader in community development, her life has been full of “firsts.”

She was the first African- American to be elected to the Poughkeepsie School Board in 1965 and later in 1970, she was the first African-American School Board President. She was the first African -American to teach at Marist College and she was the first African- American to become responsible for the distribution of federal funding that would engender human needs programs that provide services to the residents of Dutchess County to this day. Before she settled in Dutchess County, Marie lived in Galesburg, Illinois and there she was the first African-American teacher at Galesburg High.

Born Marie Eloise Nero in New Orleans, LA, she was the eldest of the three children of Charles L. Nero Sr. a longshoreman and Daisy Lee Blackmore Nero, a practical nurse. She was educated in New Orleans public schools and earned her Baccalaureate in Secondary Education with honors from Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Unable to attend Louisiana State University for graduate work due to a segregationist state law, she earned her graduate degree in Journalism from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, also with honors.

Quietly charismatic and completely unassuming, Marie has successfully advocated for the hiring of minority teachers in the Poughkeepsie K-12 educational system and has raised awareness for the need for minority board members in Dutchess County’s nonprofit sector. Marie has served on innumerable nonprofit boards and has frequently been the only person of color on that board. Her advocacy in this matter has resulted in an increased diversity on many of these boards. Her emphasis on inclusiveness is based on her firm belief that as our society becomes more diversified, we must incorporate the beliefs, attitudes and values of all cultures in order to make the best decisions for the community as a whole.

Whether she was teaching, or she was involved in community development work, Marie has always been acutely aware of the responsibilities that came with being the first African –American and sometimes the only African –American in a given setting. She understood that it was her responsibility to open doors, develop acceptance, create a standard for excellence and lead the way for other young women. Very early on, in Galesburg, she understood that when she was hired as an English teacher, her biggest impact was that it led to others being hired. She has recounted, “There hadn’t been any African-Americans working for the school district at all when they hired me. Soon afterwards, they hired a black maintenance person.” She also knew of another young African-American woman who, encouraged by Marie’s experiences as a black teacher within an all- white faculty, developed the confidence to become a teacher at the same school.

Marie has been a role model for a generation of African – American and white women. Her professional advice to women is simple: Get the best education you can, do your homework, then go do the best job that you can. Have a goal and try to reach it. If you fail the first time, try again. On the subject of interpersonal relationships, her message is equally simple but profound: Always be fair and treat others

with respect. Needless to say, hard work, fairness towards others and respect have been the cornerstones of her life.

The imprint of Marie's personality and thoughtful work can be seen everywhere in Dutchess County, NY. It is especially evident in the work of the non-profit agencies that she has tirelessly served for over forty years. Some of these agencies are: The United Way of Dutchess County, The Poughkeepsie Housing Authority, Grace Smith House (a shelter for victims of domestic abuse), Family Services, The Children's Home, The Community Foundation of Dutchess County, the Eleanor Roosevelt at Val-kill Race Relations Project, National Model Cities Community Development Association (now Community Development), Vassar Brothers Hospital, Mid-Hudson Pattern for Progress, The Dutchess/Putnam Private Industry Council, the Northern Dutchess NAACP, Youth Resources Development Council.

Her awards and recognitions include the Alexis de Tocqueville Award, the Eleanor Roosevelt Medal of Honor, Marist College President's Award, the Service Above Self Award, Poughkeepsie Branch American Association of University Women Woman of the Year 1982, to name just a few.

Marie is a former national officer of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., having edited its national magazine for four years. She is founder of the sorority's local chapter and has served as its *Basileus* (President), *Grammateus* (Secretary) and *Phylacter* (Parliamentarian).

Marie was married to Rupert Tarver and had six sons, five of whom survive. She has five grandsons and one granddaughter.

Geeta Desai

Poughkeepsie Branch

Source: Personal Interview