“CIVIL RIGHTS IS NOT JUST A MOVEMENT, IT’S A WAY OF LIFE.”
Spoken by Harry Belafonte, these few words describe the life of Professor Charles O. Ross, Jr., the message he lived, and the legacy he left behind. Known for his unwavering battle for civil rights and his outspoken nature, Ross never shied away from activism and confronting those whom he believed were in opposition of advancing civil rights.

In 2013, Ross was posthumously inducted into the Ohio Civil Rights Hall of Fame. This distinguished honor acknowledges citizens who have left their mark in the State of Ohio through their tireless efforts in furthering civil and human rights in their communities. This Hall of Fame acknowledges the exemplary leadership through which these citizens have helped eliminate barriers to equal opportunity in Ohio, as well as fosters cultural awareness and understanding for a more just society. Ross championed the Civil Rights Movement in Ohio and other places for several decades. He had an unswerving fervor for justice and equity.

IN THE CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY
As a faculty member and community leader, Ross taught students the importance of taking responsibility for one’s life. While he never shied away from calling attention to unfair circumstances created by institutional discrimination and the resulting disparities, he abhorred equally any effort to use those limitations as an excuse for not achieving one’s highest potential. He was known for telling others that excuses were not part of his disposition.

According to Dean Tom Gregoire of the College of Social Work, “Ross did a great deal through his teaching and community leadership to produce a generation of students who were committed to both the ideal of civil rights, and to the action required to create meaningful change. His work as a faculty member alone made a significant impact upon the civil rights movement in Ohio.”

Ross’ son, Marcus, an alumnus of the Capital University Law School, fondly recalls how, “He really enjoyed stimulating critical thought in the classroom environment. He was a true academic, a real Renaissance man, and he loved the university.”

Students would agree. During his tenure with the College of Social Work, Ross was voted Outstanding Professor by social work students; he served as faculty advisor to Mwanafunzi, the local undergraduate chapter of the National Association of Black Social Workers; and he worked with numerous student activist groups around campus.

During a leadership transition at the College of Social Work, Ross was selected in a vote by his colleagues to serve as acting Dean. Although the Office of Academic
Affairs made a different appointment decision, the vote reflected the level of respect and confidence placed in Ross by his colleagues. He had the ability to be at once both a controversial political figure and respected colleague.

True to his civil rights mission, Ross continued to be engaged in mass community mobilization and grassroots activism at the university and in the community during a period of social upheaval in Columbus. His political activism was primarily on behalf of African American students and the African American community at large. He called attention to disparities in law enforcement that often treated minority group members unfairly. One of his most well-known areas of activism centered on the recruitment and retention of African American students, faculty and staff, and the inclusion of racially diverse persons on the university’s Board of Trustees.

No stranger to controversy, in 1971, Ross also caught the attention of university leaders and its board with his involvement in racial turmoil at Linden-McKinley High School, starting with a May 1971 rally eulogizing Malcolm X, the Black Muslim leader slain in 1965. “He understood the importance of engaging the community at large to improve the quality of life of individuals in central Ohio who didn’t have a voice,” Marcus Ross said. “By taking positions on issues that weren’t popular at the time, he helped shaped public policy. He understood grass-roots electoral politics.”

He was fearless.

POLITICAL IMPACT

Beyond his academic and community outreach endeavors, Ross played an active role in electoral politics at the local and national level. He served as a key cabinet member in the successful foundational campaign effort to elect Richard Hatcher as the first African American mayor in Gary, Indiana, in 1967 and as a political consultant to the campaign to elect Harold Washington as the first African American Mayor in Chicago, Illinois, in 1983. In addition, Ross ran as an independent write-in candidate for mayor of Columbus, Ohio, in 1984 and served as a delegate to the 1984 Democratic National Convention for Presidential candidate Jesse Jackson.

Long standing Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman stated that when he began considering running for mayor, one of his first calls was to solicit the counsel of Ross.

LEGACY

Ross believed that the future of a more just society was in its youth. His career reflects a lifetime of commitment to young people. To increase awareness among youth of racial and ethnic heritage, Ross founded an independent, African-centered curriculum school for elementary and middle school youth called Harambee Uhuru, which operated on the Near East Side of Columbus for a decade. His commitment to creating equal opportunities and preparing others to take advantage of those opportunities led him to also establish College Bound, a summer camp based at Ohio State, which exposed inner city youth to tutoring, personal development, and the importance of a college education. Both Harambee Uhuru and College Bound provided youth with opportunities to excel in academic environments that would prepare them to be successful on a much larger stage as an adult. Ross worked tirelessly, without hesitation, to pay forward to those who came after him.

Ross approached all tasks with passion, commitment, and good humor. “He was gregarious, outspoken, and had a zest for life,” according to his son. “I think this city’s much better as a result of the things my father did.”

Dr. Jacquelyn Meshelemiah, his former student and later his colleague in the College of Social Work, remarks that, “Professor Ross was and will always be one of the bravest persons to walk this earth. Not only did he tell others to be outspoken, strong, confident, passionate, and well-versed on political matters, but he took it upon himself to show them how to do it! He was a teacher to many—Brother Ross to many more.”

In 2006, Ross retired from Ohio State as an Associate Professor Emeritus. Ross died in 2013. Our city and the College of Social Work are better for having been home to him. His induction into the Ohio Civil Rights Hall of Fame was a well-deserved accolade.