

Obituaries; Arthur Winston; 100; 76-Year Transit Worker

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Arthur Winston, who set a remarkable personal record by missing only a single day in 76 years of work, died of congestive heart failure Thursday as he slept in his South Los Angeles home. He was 100.

Many of his colleagues and friends honored him by calling him Mr. Winston. He cleaned Los Angeles buses and trains for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The only shift he missed was the day in 1988 that his wife died. Otherwise, his bosses at the MTA said, they had never known him to arrive late or leave early. He retired March 23, one day after he turned 100.

Why then?

"Oh," he said with a shrug, "100 years seemed like enough."

Mr. Winston's great-granddaughter, Brandii Wright, said Friday that working until he turned 100 was a long-sought milestone. "He accomplished his goal," she said. "After reaching that, he felt like he did what he had to do in life. It was OK to move on. I'm just really proud of him."

Mr. Winston was slender and well-groomed, a tan-skinned man who liked to step out of his house each morning with his shirt freshly pressed.

Even in his last years, he walked with the upright dignity of a man utterly confident in himself and what he stood for. His chin rose, and his almond-shaped eyes sparkled when he ticked off what he considered his greatest accomplishments.

They were confronting the racism he experienced as a black man, living long enough to see his great-great-grandchildren, and being a witness to so much history.

Still, he did not consider himself particularly special. "I'm just a working man," he said in a 2005 interview, five months before he died. "Nothing more, nothing less. My daddy taught me the right way to do things. I just tried to follow what Daddy said."

Urban Storyteller

Never shy about making his feelings known, Mr. Winston was something of an urban storyteller. At work, at home and in his neighborhood, youngsters, including people in their 60s and 70s, hovered around when he gave advice. He spoke on everything from politics to finances to the importance of work.

Foremost among his beliefs was that a person should stay active as long as possible. "Stop in one place too long, you freeze up," he would say. "Freeze up, you're done for." The best way to keep from freezing up? That was simple, he said. "Keep working. Work and work some more. That's all there is to this live-a-long-life thing."

There were other nuggets. In his bluesy, scratchy voice, Mr. Winston often opined on the dangers of racking up debt and buying things that are not needed -- "fancy cars and such." And he warned about the dangers that came with too much alcohol, too much fried food, too much exercise or too many pills.

At work on a winter day in 2005, he told a group of colleagues that one of the reasons he had lived so long was because he opted for a few tablespoons of castor oil whenever he felt sick. Over-the-counter medication, he said, was something to avoid. "Pills are one of the biggest problems people face today, especially these old people you see out there," he said. "I've never in all my life seen so many people taking so many pills. And at the same time it seems like people are nothing but sicker than ever. It's a shame, all these old people dying over the pills they take."

No matter what contributed to his spunk and longevity -- good genes, an aversion to modern medicine, or just sheer determination -- the results were evident. A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Labor said that he had never heard of anyone who had worked as long and as continuously as Mr. Winston. In 1997, MTA officials named the bus yard where he worked after him.

Like Clockwork

Even as he neared 100, Mr. Winston kept at it. Like clockwork, 15 minutes before each shift, he pulled into the Arthur Winston Bus Division. He parked in a spot reserved for him, checked to be sure his blue uniform was tidy and marched off to clock in.

He did slow down. In recent years, he took longer breaks. He sat in the warmth of the second-floor break room, watched CNN and offered up a steady stream of commentary on current issues.

He grew angry at the Bush administration, the war in Iraq and the state of black America, which he considered to be in a shambles.

Nonetheless, he kept doing what he was asked. "Puts in his eight-hour days," said his boss, Alex DiNuzzo. "He never complains. He's always willing to adjust to do what is needed. Works faster than a lot of guys. And does it with the best attitude out there."

Each morning, he eagerly walked the sprawling South Los Angeles bus yard. He cleaned grime off bus floors, wiped down bus windows and supervised a small crew of workers.

Following his lead was easy, his co-workers said. They held him in too much awe to question him.

"You see him and you think to yourself, 'That man, after all he had seen and done -- why, he's better than a history book. Look, he's still at it,'" said Roy Turner, a bus mechanic. "I think about him when I get tired. It's like, how can I be tired? Look at this man, almost 100, and he's not tired."

Mr. Winston grew up on a farm in Oklahoma, the son of a sharecropper who lived until he was 99.

In 1924, when Mr. Winston was 17 and fresh from the Midwest, he took a job cleaning trolley cars for the Los Angeles Railway Co., a predecessor to the MTA.

He worked for four years and then quit, partly because he was frustrated. He wanted to be a driver. But the company did not allow black drivers.

On Jan. 24, 1934, he decided to come back to work. When the transit agency finally let blacks drive, he was well into adulthood - - he and his wife, Frances, were busy raising kids. "It just seemed too late to change," he said.

He remained a transit janitor. From the vantage point of his bus yard, he witnessed the city's growing pains. He saw whites leave South Los Angeles, saw blacks become a majority, then saw blacks begin to leave as Latinos came in larger numbers. He witnessed periods when people got along and moments when the city exploded in riots.

To his chagrin, he watched the destruction of the dense network of trolleys that connected parts of Los Angeles. Then, over the last two decades, he saw the slow rebirth of commuter rail.

Keeping Positive

Mr. Winston took constant change in stride. He said he tried hard to be sure that bitter times did not defeat him. He used moments in history as touchstones, reminders of his good fortune to live so long.

From the 1940s until the day he died, he lived in a small white house just south of the Santa Monica Freeway. In his last years, he shared the home with his great-granddaughter and his great-great-grandson.

"I guess, if you live long enough, you'll see everything," he said one day in 2004, as he sat on the steps of his house and looked out at his street. "Sometimes you see things come around twice. I don't mind. I like it.

"My daddy taught me how to work, and he also taught me that, no matter what's going on around you, just stay strong on the inside. Don't bother nobody. Don't let nothin' destroy you. No matter how things are going in the outside world, just keep going. Keep going, and learn from what you see in front of you."

Mr. Winston is survived by his brother, North Winston, 98, his great-granddaughter Brandii Wright, 29, and his great-great-grandson, Kenny, 4. A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. Friday at Faithful Central Bible Church's Tabernacle, 321 N. Eucalyptus Ave., Inglewood.