

# Remembering Marilyn Clement, June 30, 1935– August 3, 2009



**By Roberta McNair, PDA Healthcare for All/Single-payer Issue Organizing Team coordinator  
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Some of us are fortunate enough to have careers that support our ethics and make us proud to declare what we do for a living. Then there is someone like Marilyn Clement, whose resume is a blueprint of her beliefs, her passion for peace, justice, and equality, and the depth of compassion she felt for each human being.

Marilyn found work of unequalled importance when she worked with Dr. Martin Luther King in Atlanta, doing research for the Civil Rights movement and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She continued to demonstrate her dedication to social equality and justice as Associate Director of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization and as Executive Director of the Center for Constitutional Rights for 12 years. She helped the African National Congress organize its largest conference before the first inclusive, democratic elections in South Africa.

Understanding the connection between equal rights, social justice, and access to healthcare, Marilyn became Executive Director of “Health Care: We Gotta Have It,” which worked early in the Clinton administration to bring grassroots women’s support to health reform. This group’s work presaged the organization formed to support HR 676, Healthcare-NOW!, of which Marilyn served as National Coordinator.

Marilyn was the Executive Director of the U.S. Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, whose goal is to empower women in their work for peace and justice. In 1995, Marilyn helped to organize the WILPF’s Peace Train to the Fourth International Women’s Congress in Beijing.

It was when longtime WILPF supporter Congressman John Conyers introduced HR 676 in 2005 that Marilyn gathered like-minded supporters of single-payer healthcare and formed Healthcare-NOW, with the goal of garnering support for the bill and achieving its passage into law. It was a natural progression for Marilyn to devote the rest of her life to single-payer healthcare’s becoming a reality for the U.S., because she understood that healthcare is a human right as essential to freedom and equality as civil rights.

For the [November 16, 2006, issue of [The Black Commentator](#), Marilyn wrote, “Healthcare-NOW is building a movement similar to the movement for voting rights in this country in the 1960s. At the time, we were told that we were moving too fast and demanding too much, that the times were changing and that civil rights would come in due time if we just kept waiting patiently. We refused to wait then and we must refuse to wait NOW.”

Marilyn clearly understood that the free-market system, which had been grabbing more and more control over every sector of American society since Ronald Reagan, should not and could not be allowed to control healthcare. If we were ever to achieve equality of opportunity for all Americans, profit had to be removed from healthcare. She responded to comments on her opinion piece on [Medscape General Medicine’s Website in October 2005](#), writing, “The clearest thing you can say about the current healthcare disaster is that it ‘does harm.’ It does harm to patients, the economy of our country, and to doctors who are trying to serve their communities.... [A]ll of the measures being proposed other than HR 676 carefully keep the insurance companies intact and the HMOs and pharmaceutical drug companies continuing to drain the money from our pockets as their highest priority. The Medicare for All bill ... is affordable because the 30% profit and administrative bureaucracy designed to make the corporations rich at the expense of sick people (and doctors)

will be gone. We will have a system that just provides healthcare for our healthcare dollars. Some people call it 'Just Health.' What a concept!"

Marilyn minced no words when it came to supporting HR 676 and decrying the abuses of the for-profit insurance companies, yet as a presence, she conveyed compassion and gentleness, her voice soft and melodic. As recently as [February, 2009, on Democracy Now](#), she very clearly and bluntly stated that while she "welcomed" Wal-Mart and other businesses "into this struggle for a national healthcare system," the people without healthcare coverage couldn't afford to wait until 2012—the target these businesses set for resolving the crisis—because "People are desperate. Desperate. And 18,000 people are dying every year, simply for lack of healthcare coverage of any kind. And so, think about how many thousands of people will die between now and 2012." Yet Marilyn conveyed greater urgency and conviction with her gentle tone than any strident voice could have achieved.

It is all these characteristics—the passion, the gentleness, the compassion, the strength of purpose—that make her loss all the deeper. She was guide and mentor to many in the single-payer movement, and she imbued in them the urgency of the work and their own strength to achieve their common goal—Medicare for All. [Donna Smith](#), whom Marilyn took under her wing during the days of sudden public attention following SiCKO's release, will miss the nurturing supportive woman who encouraged her writing and kept her focused on what mattered: "[Marilyn] emailed me and encouraged me to report on my travels—and the people I met along the way—and on my own vision for healthcare reform. She took those early essays and submitted them for me to the 'Black Commentator,' and I wondered why she thought anyone would read them or care. She posted the pieces on the Healthcare-NOW website, and she stayed in touch with me—praising me, always praising me. She stood by me when I testified before Congress, and encouraged the very first healthcare justice vigil at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.... Some of the events we attended brought in hundreds of people, some only a dozen. But Marilyn made every event seem a success and allowed no person to lord over another for any reason. With a firm and just passion for her work, she recognized every contribution for its potential."

Diane Shamis, PDA's Healthcare for All IOT coordinator until May, 2009, remembers "Marilyn was both a dear friend—really a maternal force—as well as a mentor and inspiration. Marilyn's passing at this juncture is so sad ... and yet I hope she was able to know that single-payer will finally be debated on the Congressional floor this fall."

For Tim Carpenter, PDA's National Director, "Marilyn has been with PDA from day one.... She was a teacher, leader in the single-payer movement, but mostly a friend to all of us in PDA. This is a real loss and will require all of us to do even more to carry the single-payer movement forward in Marilyn's memory."

And for Katie Robbins, who succeeds Marilyn at Healthcare-NOW!, "Working with Marilyn Clement was a joy and privilege on a personal and professional level. She elegantly embodied social justice in her work and in her life. At a recent event at Judson Memorial Church held in her honor, she reminded us to cheers of admiration from the crowd 'Love to you all. Keep up the fight. And we are going to win single-payer healthcare.' We have Marilyn to thank for the progress we have made in pushing the single-payer message into the public arena and in Congress. Healthcare-NOW! strengthens its resolve to win true healthcare justice as part of Marilyn's vision for the work we do and that people so desperately need."

Everyone who wants to see Medicare for All in this country will honor Marilyn Clement's memory with their dedication and tenacity to the cause and the principles she lived every day.

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