

Former Austin civil rights leader William Astor Kirk dies

By **Ben Wear**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Updated: 8:27 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011

Published: 7:52 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2011

William Astor Kirk , a former Huston-Tillotson University professor who played a key role in Austin's desegregation efforts in the 1950s, died Friday in Washington. He was 89 .

Kirk, who wrote six books, also was active in the movement to end segregation nationwide in the United Methodist Church.

He held executive positions in the federal government for two decades, beginning with the Johnson administration in the mid-1960s.

"I would call my father the ultimate disciple, the teacher," said son Bill Kirk Jr. , a Washington lawyer. "And for me as a young man growing up, the ultimate role model. He taught me how to be a man."

The elder Kirk, born in the East Texas town of Harleton , began his higher education at Wiley College , a historically black college in nearby Marshall. But he soon transferred to prestigious Howard University in Washington, where he got his bachelor's and master's degrees in political science.

He and his newlywed wife, Vivian, moved to Austin in 1947 when he took a position teaching government and economics at Huston-Tillotson. He remained there, save for a sabbatical in 1952 and 1953 when he attended the London School of Economics on a Fulbright scholarship, until 1961 .

During his Austin sojourn, Kirk broke ground in the civil rights movement in a number of ways.

In 1950, he attempted to enroll in the segregated University of Texas' political science doctoral program. In consultations that at one point included a personal meeting with the state attorney general, Kirk was first told he would have to attend Texas Southern University instead. Then he was assigned classes with UT professors that were to be held at a YMCA. After the first class, Kirk informed the professor that it was an unacceptable arrangement, and his \$26 in tuition was refunded.

Later, after the U.S. Supreme Court decision on Heman Sweatt's attempt to be admitted to UT's School of Law, which overturned the university's whites-only admissions policy, Kirk was admitted to the doctoral program on campus. He was the first African American to get a UT doctorate in political science, in 1958, his son said.

Kirk also led Huston-Tillotson students in various protests against segregated public facilities in Austin during that era, and he was said to be instrumental in the desegregation of the city's library and other facilities.

"He was just a complete gentleman," said Gary Lavergne , UT's director of admissions research, who met and interviewed Kirk for his book "Before Brown: Heman Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall and the Long Road to Justice."

"He was a person who believed in forgiving and in not allowing bitterness to define his life," Lavergne said.

Bill Kirk said the family left Austin for a short time in the early 1960s to work for the Methodist church and was part of the "Committee of Five" assigned to carry out desegregation of the church. Then Bill Moyers , aide to President Lyndon B. Johnson, offered him a position as deputy regional director of the Office of Economic Opportunity in Austin. Kirk declined the position at first.

"He was summoned to the (LBJ Ranch), basically chastised (by Johnson), let me put it that way," Bill Kirk said. The president argued that he needed African Americans in such prominent positions. Kirk accepted the job, and

the family moved again to Austin for several years in the late 1960s. He was later transferred to Washington and lived on the East Coast for the rest of his life.

In his final years, Kirk had a consulting company and remained active in church policy. Even in his last months, Kirk was working against discrimination in the United Methodist church against gays and bisexuals, his son said.

"He was always interested in social justice," Bill Kirk said. "My dad believed passionately in the equality of people."

bwear@statesman.com; 445-3698

Find this article at:

[Print this page](#)

[Close](#)

<http://www.statesman.com/news/local/former-austin-civil-rights-leader-william-astor-kirk-1752106.html>

