



## **SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES**

### **Memorial and Historical Commission**

**To preserve and enhance our historic legacy, so that our contributions will be maintained and enriched for both present and future generations.**

*From the Archives*

**Juanita Millender-McDonald** (September 7, 1938 – April 22, 2007) was an American politician who served as a member of the United States House of Representatives from 1996 until her death in 2007, representing California's 37th congressional district, which includes most of South Central Los Angeles and the city of Long Beach, California. She was a member of the Democratic Party.

On December 19, 2006, Millender-McDonald was named Chairwoman of the House Committee on House Administration for the 110th Congress. She was the first African-American woman to chair the committee. She was also a member of the Congressional Black Caucus and of the New Democrat Coalition and was considered a front-runner for the job of Secretary of Transportation if John Kerry had been elected President in 2004.

**Early life** Even from her beginnings as a teacher, Congresswoman Juanita Millender-McDonald fought for others. She wrote a textbook exposing female students to non-traditional careers. She is an advocate for educational and women's issues. Millender-McDonald was on nearly every level of politics from Democratic convention delegate to her position as a United States House Representative.

Millender-McDonald was born in Birmingham, Alabama on September 7, 1938. When she was three her mother died and her father moved his family of five children to the Los Angeles area. She lived in the city of Carson for over 30 years. She began her career as a teacher after receiving a business degree from the University of Redlands and earning her teaching credentials in the California State University System. Millender-McDonald then went on to acquire her Masters Degree in Educational Administration from California State University, Los Angeles. Despite her busy schedule as a member of the House of Representatives, the Congresswoman made education an important and personal part of her life. She completed a Masters/Doctorate Degree program in Public Administration at the University of Southern California.

After receiving her Masters, Millender-McDonald left the classroom to become a writer for the Los Angeles Unified School District and edited a textbook designed for young women and girls called *Images*. The textbook, which was written to steer female students toward non-traditional careers, was one of the first examples of Millender-McDonald's life-long interest in women's issues. In 1984 the then high school administrator took her daughter to the Democratic National Convention as a delegate. The pair was the first mother-daughter combination to be delegates at a political party's national convention. After her stint as a writer, Millender-McDonald was named the Director of Gender Equity Programs for the Los Angeles school district, the second largest school system in the country.

In 1990 Millender-McDonald began her career as a politician. She was elected to the Carson City Council, and became the body's first African-American woman. In only her second year, she was appointed Mayor Pro Tempore. One of her first acts was to have an ordinance passed that made the position of Mayor an elected office rather than an appointed one. She also began her career-long interest in transportation issues when she took on the Southern Pacific Transportation Company, nicknamed The Octopus. The company's endless lines of freight trains blocked rush-hour traffic in Carson and Alameda. When she asked the company about rescheduling the trains, Millender-McDonald told the *Los Angeles Times*' Bill Boyarsky, "They took an arrogant attitude. Their response was they couldn't do anything about it." This transportation concern would follow Millender-McDonald all the way to the national legislature eight years later.

**Led A Busy Political Career** In 1992 Millender-McDonald decided to take her political career to the state level. After defeating two Democratic incumbents in the primary, she became the first woman to represent the 55th Assembly District in the California State Legislature. In Sacramento, she continued to be attracted to education and transportation issues.

In her first three years at the California State Legislature, Millender-McDonald introduced over 100 bills; several dealt with the transportation problem she first confronted as a member of the Carson City Council. The solution to the slow-running trains, which continued to delay the city's rush hour traffic, is called the Alameda corridor. The \$1.8 billion public works project would lay new train tracks and build trenches and bridges. One sticking point in the deal was the \$261 million the Southern Pacific was demanding for its Alameda Street route. The State disputed the amount claiming it was worth only \$60 million. Millender-McDonald maneuvered around Southern Pacific by introducing and pushing through a bill giving the state power to acquire a right of way through eminent domain. The bill would force the railroad company to accept a government-assessed value for the route. Millender-McDonald then fought to make the Alameda corridor a national transportation artery, which made it eligible for federal funding. In the State Legislature, she also became the first woman to chair both the Insurance Committee and the Revenue and Taxation Committee. In the field of education Millender-McDonald conducted hearings across the state for three years to create an urban education reform proposal.

When Representative Walter R. Tucker III resigned from office in 1996 after being convicted of extortion and income tax fraud, there was a special election to fill the remaining months of his term. Eight Democrats competed in the election to determine who would represent the 37th District. One of those Democrats was Juanita Millender-McDonald. The former Garfield High School teacher won the special election to become the first woman to represent perhaps the most ethnically diverse district in the country. She won enough votes in the March 1996 special election not only to go to Washington D.C., but to automatically qualify for the regular November election. In the full election seven months later, she won against her Republican challenger with 85% of the vote.

**Tackled Jobs, Women's Issues, Drug War** Millender-McDonald was named to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and to its Subcommittees on Aviation and Surface Transportation. She was also named to the Committee on Small Business and became the ranking member of the Subcommittee on Tax, Finance and Exports, along with a member of the Subcommittee on Empowerment. Less than two years after being elected Millender-McDonald was named Region One Democratic Whip. One of her top priorities was the maintenance of the Alameda Corridor, which brought federal dollars and jobs to her district. She told James Bornemeier of the *Los Angeles Times* about the importance of the project: "There is a critical need for jobs with good wages to give (the district) a sense of hope and economic well-being." In another move to secure funds for her district, Millender-McDonald voted to place transportation money "off budget" so those programs could not be cut to balance the budget.

**At A Glance** ...Born Juanita Millender on September 7, 1938, in Birmingham, AL; died on April 21, 2007, in Carson, CA; married James McDonald Jr.; children: Valerie, Angela, Sherryll, Chris, and Keith. *Education*: University of Redlands, BS, 1979 (some sources indicate 1981); California State University, MEd, educational administration, 1987; University of Southern California, studied public administration. *Politics*: Democrat. *Religion*: Baptist.

**Career**: California, high school teacher, career center administrator, 1980s(?); Los Angeles Unified School District, writer editor; *Images* (California state textbook about self-esteem in women), editor, 1980s(?); Carson City Council, elected to office, 1990; California State Legislature, elected to office, 1992; member of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1996-2007.

**Awards: Spot on the Watts Walk of Fame, 1998.** Another big influence on Millender-McDonald's work is women's issues. She has held procurement hearings for woman and minority business owners and organized the first Minority Women and Children AIDS Walk. Her most dramatic step for the advancement of women came in her conflict with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). As a member of the House Aviation Subcommittee, she asked for hearings after a *USA Today* report exposed the sexual harassment common in control towers. She also called on the FAA to make a full report on its plans to improve the working atmosphere for women.

By far the most controversial stance that Millender-McDonald has taken involved crack cocaine. After an article in the *San Jose Mercury News* linking the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Nicaraguan Contras with the drug trade in South Central Los Angeles, California Representative Maxine Waters brought the matter to the nation's attention. Six months after her election, Millender-McDonald introduced House Resolution 518 to hold a Congressional Inquiry with the Inspector General of the Department of Justice. On November 15, 1996 she brought the Director of the CIA John Deutch to her Watts district to explain the allegations in a town hall type meeting. Though the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Deutch told the crowd, "I will get to the bottom of it," the discussion did not go well. The audience was angry and did not believe the CIA Director's claims that the agency was not involved with or knew anything about the drug trade in the area. During the meeting he was constantly heckled and interrupted and called a murderer. Millender-McDonald was forced to intervene several times on behalf of the Director. She even received criticism that she was too easy with Deutch.

While she did credit the CIA's own investigation of the matter, she continued to press for an independent investigation. On February 13, 1997 she re-introduced legislation for an official inquiry of the CIA's connection to the crack cocaine trade. House Resolution 70 would establish a select committee in the House of Representatives. Millender-McDonald released a statement through her office on the reintroduction of the investigation legislation: "I think the American people deserve answers. The mere idea that our government could have, in any way, been involved in the financing or distribution of this horrendous drug is repulsive to me. I believe that it is incumbent on us to investigate these allegations fully and report the findings to the public."

For her efforts on behalf of her district, she was honored with a spot on the Watts Walk of Fame in February of 1998. Over the next decade, Millender-McDonald continued to win re-election with large margins of support. She also took on more responsibility on the House when she was named to the Committee on House Administration, which has jurisdiction over House operations, such as salaries and expenses for committees and staff, benefit and retirement matters, and federal election procedures, in 2005. Millender-McDonald became the first black chairperson of the Committee in 2007 after Democrats had gained control of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Millender-McDonald's health became a source of speculation in the early 2000s. She underwent major surgery in 2005, but neither she nor her staff provided many details, and she remained an active member

of Congress. She handily won election to her seventh term in 2006, winning 82 percent of the vote. In April of 2007, however, Millender-McDonald requested a four- to six-week leave of absence from her legislative duties so that she could attend to her health. Less than a week later, on April 21, 2007, she died of cancer at her home in Carson, California. She was 68. She is survived by her husband James McDonald Jr. and their five adult children. Yet the public will not easily forget her, as the impact of her work could still be enjoyed by her constituency. "Juanita Millender-McDonald was a trailblazer, always advocating for the full participation of all Americans in the success and prosperity of our country," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi remarked, according to *MSNBC.com*. "The dignity with which she faced her illness was an indication of the determination with which she always served the people of her district." The legacy of her work will serve her constituency for years to come.

**Legacy** In the House, Millender-McDonald will be remembered for her liberal voting record. For her work on issues which included election reform and genocide in Darfur and Cambodia and also for her work with Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright and Ambassador John Miller on human trafficking and women's rights issues. It won't be forgotten how she drew national attention in 1996 when she had then-CIA director John Deutch address the community of Watts, California, about allegations that profits from domestic sales of crack cocaine were funneled to the CIA-backed Contras in Nicaragua. She will be remembered for her commitment to protecting international human rights.

Throughout much of the first decade of the 21st Century Millender-McDonald was named one of the 100 Most Influential Black Americans by *Ebony* magazine. Millender-McDonald was the founder and executive director of the League of African-American Women and also founded the Young Advocates, a program which provided training in political leadership for young African-Americans. She was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and an Honorary Member of Eta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated, a business and professional women's sorority. A member of Second Baptist Church of Los Angeles under the Pastoral leadership of Dr. Thomas Kilgore and continued to be obedient to God's word under Pastor William S. Epps until her death. Her interment was at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Cypress, Calif.