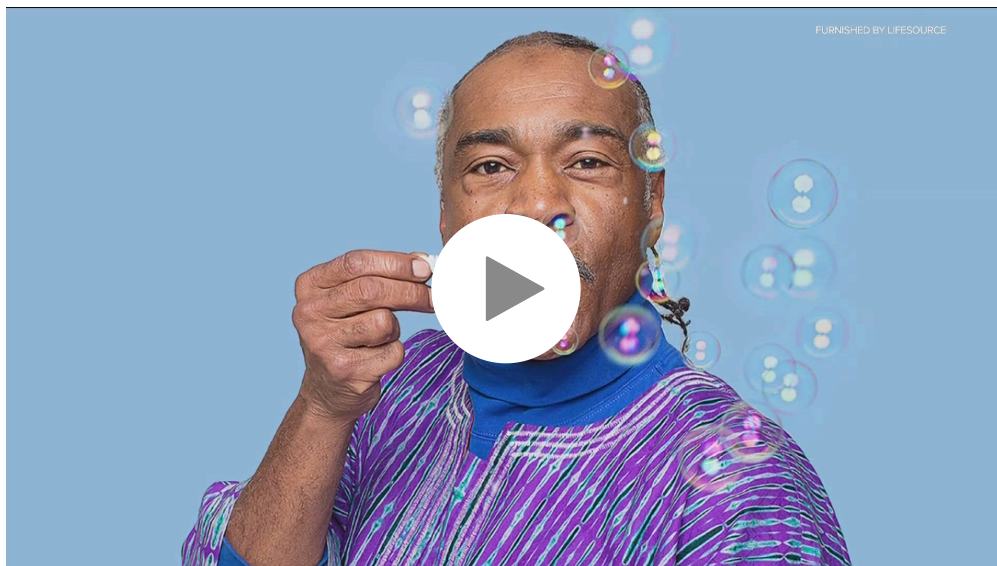


'He's the peacemaker' | Community remembers, honors peace advocate Melvin Giles

Melvin Giles envisioned a world “filled with bubbles, not bullets,” a sentiment that guided his life’s work.



Author: Raya Quttaineh

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SAINT PAUL, Minn. — Across the Twin Cities, people are mourning the loss of a widely respected community leader and peace advocate. Melvin Giles, 66, passed away on Tuesday, leaving behind a powerful legacy of activism, community-building, and compassion—particularly in the Rondo and Frogtown neighborhoods he called home.

"Melvin was what I would call an energizer," said lifelong friend Nate Galloway. "He had a lot of energy. He had a way of pulling a lot of people together and connecting them."

Giles envisioned a world “filled with bubbles, not bullets,” a sentiment that guided his life’s work. Adjacent to his childhood home in Rondo, Giles founded what’s now known as the Peace Sanctuary Garden—a small oasis of fresh, organic foods and flowers. The garden is part of the Urban Farm and Garden Alliance, which Giles helped establish more than a decade ago. The initiative promotes collaboration across several community gardens to provide more access to affordable, healthy foods in communities oftentimes neglected.

"Basically, it's like a food desert in the area," Urban Farm and Garden Alliance coordinator Shari Cueto said as she stood at the Peace Sanctuary Garden on Aurora Avenue in Saint Paul.

"There's no healthy foods around, and it's our right to have healthy food. He wanted everybody to have that right and to have that access."

Cueto said she and Giles knew each other for two decades. "Our families had went to school together," she explained. "All the families in the Rondo neighborhood are all connected. Melvin is Rondo. He was everything, he was my mentor, he's the peacemaker."

Giles' roles were many: activist, mentor, artist, educator, gardener, leader and steadfast advocate for peace. He installed structures known as "peace poles" across Minnesota that promoted worldwide peace. He also championed organ donation, a cause close to his heart after the death of his late partner Mary, who was also a tissue donor. Inspired by her passing in 2014, Giles collaborated with LifeSource in Minneapolis to promote awareness around organ and tissue donation, particularly within communities of color.

"Many communities of color do have a disproportionate need for organ transplants, like livers or kidneys, but also have a lower rate of saying yes to donation," said LifeSource Chief Administrative Officer Susan Mau Larson. "So it's very important that we engage in community, understand what the barriers are to donation and provide information. Melvin was a critical part of that."

Although he received numerous awards and honors for his work, those who knew him said he was driven by a deep commitment to his community and a desire to sow seeds of peace.

"Melvin is one of those people that I feel sincerely grateful to have known," Larson said. "He was wise, he was warm, he was a community leader who just gave to everybody he saw."

Giles was selected as the Community Research Fellow for the University of Minnesota Dept. of Soil, Water and Climate this school year. He was also a community faculty instructor at Bethel University. Nearly 30 years ago, he founded an annual peace celebration in Saint Paul—a tradition that continues to this day. Now, Giles' mission lives on through the people and projects he inspired.

According to LifeSource, approximately 2,700 people in Minnesota are currently waiting for a life-saving organ transplant.

"He has inspired many people to register as donors and I think his legacy will be to continue to inspire people to register," Larson said. "I don't think we can quantify the lifesaving impact of what he's done."

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