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## Remembering Melvin Giles, the ‘bubble man’ of St. Paul’s Rondo

He installed community gardens and symbolic “peace poles” wherever he could find green spaces



Rondo community members Melvin Giles (right) and Laverne McCartney Knighton blow “peace bubbles” after an interview about the significance of the Dale Street Bridge Project. The two Rondo neighborhood leaders see the bridge as a step toward reconstructing the community. (ThreeSixty Journalism)

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Some will remember Melvin Giles as an apostle for urban gardening, a lifelong advocate for St. Paul's Rondo and Frogtown neighborhoods that he called home, or as a stalwart voice for peace who installed raised beds, community gardens and symbolic "peace poles" wherever he could find green spaces.

Most everyone who knew Giles will remember him as the "bubble man" — constantly armed with a smile, a wand and the drive to blow bubbles at any community event.

Giles, a co-leader of the Urban Farm and Garden Alliance and a respected elder in Rondo's Black community, died in his sleep Tuesday at his Woodbury home. He was 66.

"I only know maybe a handful of people in my whole life who I've never seen get upset and yell or share any expression of anger," said his nephew, Anura Si-Asar, in an interview Thursday. "He always had a positive and uplifting energy. I don't know how that's possible. He lived the peace that he talked about."

A fan of "Star Trek," Giles likened himself in [a 2023 interview with the Pioneer Press](#) to a time traveler looking backward in time to draw lessons from the past, while also looking generations into the future toward a better world. He called the peace poles he installed in urban gardens simple monuments, each bearing the inscription "May Peace Prevail On Earth" in several languages.

"The peace poles are my time-traveling vehicles, and the bubbles are the fuel," he said at the time.

Born in Chicago to a traveling Baptist preacher, Giles was the youngest of four brothers. He never married or had kids of his own, but he treated his 15 nieces and nephews and 27 grand-nieces and -nephews like his own children, Si-Asar said. The family moved to St. Paul when Giles was about 5 years old.

Giles worked for Catholic Charities for 15 years, serving for seven years as the director of its Catholic Charities Frogtown Center. He also served as an adjunct community faculty instructor at Bethel University's Anthropology Department.

He was active in urban growing and anti-racism initiatives such as AfroEco, which attempts to source sustainable products from South Africa, and served as an adviser to the diversity committee of the Ramsey County Master Gardeners.

He was also a certified facilitator of Racial Sobriety workshops, an anti-racism trainer for the Minnesota Tri-Council Commission of the Council of Churches and a founding member of the St. Paul Pluralism Circle. He was a regular contributor to the Midway-Como-Frogtown Monitor newspaper, where he authored a column named "Peace Bubbles."

In the 1980s, he ran a weekly community newspaper in Sioux Falls, S.D., called "Everyday People."

Giles received the Martin Luther King "Dream Keeper Award" in 2003, the McKnight Foundation "Virginia McKnight Binger Award" in Human Service in 2005, the "Outstanding World Citizen Award" in 2008, Bethel University's "George K. Brushaber Reconciliation Award" in 2009, the "Morrill Hall/ Rachel Tilsen Social Justice Award" in 2011, and the Blooming St. Paul "Garden Advocate Award" in 2017.

In 2023, he was named as one of seven inductees in the inaugural Black Legacy and Leadership Enrichment Initiative, a pilot program that awarded unrestricted grants of \$55,000 to local activists to rest, recharge and ultimately better serve the community.

Through the work of the Urban Farm and Garden Alliance, Giles was instrumental in installing raised beds of edibles in backyard box gardens, larger community gardens and a greenhouse or two, providing fresh food in areas where leafy greens were otherwise in short supply.

Recent garden locations included the green outside the Lexington Commons apartments on Lexington Parkway, a housing development that caters to the previously homeless; the Lovejoy Family Community Garden on Grotto Street; the Greenhouse Garden on Dale Street in Frogtown; the Pilgrim Baptist Church on Central Avenue; the Morning Star Baptist Church on Selby Avenue; and the Peace Sanctuary Garden on Aurora Avenue.

Memorial services will be announced later this month, Si-Asar said, with arrangements to be made by Brooks Funeral Home.

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