

MIETRO

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2000

**COURTLAND
MILLOY**

A Poor Man Who Enriched Others' Lives

When then-President George Bush encountered the homeless man outside St. John's Episcopal Church that day in April 1989, it seemed for a moment that nothing good would come of it.

"Will you pray for me?" William Wallace Brown Jr. asked Bush as he and his wife, Barbara, were about to enter the church.

"No," Bush replied.

The 41st president then politely added, "Come inside with us—and pray for yourself."

So began an odyssey of sorts that would transform Brown. He would go on to become a member of the "Church of the Presidents," as St. John's is called. And through his fellowship, St. John's—the bright yellow church across Lafayette Square from the White House—would be transformed as well.

Mr. Brown dressed in old clothes—you could tell he was a street person," recalled Virginia Jones, an assistant head usher at the church. "When time came to take up



William Brown Jr. will be honored Sunday at St. John's Episcopal Church.

collections, I was going to skip him. But he stopped me and gave me a wadded-up dollar bill. He gave one every Sunday. Now, some of our more well-to-do members only put in a dollar, and many of them were humbled by Mr. Brown's spirit of generosity."

On Oct. 17, Brown died of an apparent heart attack at his home in the Woodner Apartments on 16th Street NW. He was 68.

A week before his unclaimed body would have been buried in a potter's field, members of St. John's—Rector Luis León among them—declared themselves Brown's spiritual next of kin and asked the D.C. corporation counsel's office for legal custody of his remains.

In a funeral scheduled for 8 a.m. Sunday, Brown's ashes will be interred in the St. John's columbarium—a sacred place on the side of the church where fewer than 100 people have been so honored since St. John's was built in 1816.

Every U.S. president since James Madison has attended services at St. John's, although it is safe to say that none of them worshiped more faithfully than Brown.

"He was here every Sunday morning, come rain, snow, you name it," León recalled.

Dolph Hatfield, a church member who was among those who helped Brown get an apartment, knew him as a man of uncommon dignity.

"Once, during 'pass the peace,' when everyone in church shakes hands and gives greetings, an individual did not shake Mr. Brown's hand," Hatfield recalled. "After the service, I told Mr. Brown, 'I'm not going to shake that guy's hand. He shouldn't treat you like that.' And Mr. Brown just said, 'Don't worry. It's not an important thing in life.' He showed no anger at all."

But Brown had plenty to be angry about. He had become homeless in 1977 as a result of alcohol abuse. He was believed to have been drunk when he signed over his house to a lawyer he had hired to help him get out of financial difficulty. The lawyer ended up selling the house, making it impossible for Brown to reclaim it.

A court later found that Brown had been defrauded and ordered the lawyer to pay him a \$50,000 settlement. But Brown refused to accept any money. The only thing he wanted was the return of the house, which had once belonged to the mother who died giving birth to him.

He never got over the loss. "He would sit on Capitol Hill all day to see if anyone would help him get his house back," recalled Mary Nusser, who met Brown on the streets and became his friend. "He'd push around a cart that was lined with newspaper headlines, most of them about corrupt lawyers."

By the time Brown died last month, the detached two-story structure with a four-car garage was estimated to be worth \$700,000.

Through it all, though—living in homeless shelters, sleeping on the streets, being hospitalized after undergoing back surgery—Brown never took another drink.

"I'd take him out to eat, and he wouldn't touch the stuff," Hatfield recalled. "Even when we did Communion, with the wafer and the wine, he never took the wine."