

## **Pioneer UCSD Dance and Theater Professor, Floyd Gaffney, Dies; Was Visionary Leader In San Diego Black Theater and Culture**

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Floyd Gaffney, one of the founders of the theatre and dance department at the University of California, San Diego, and a pioneer of black culture and dramatic arts in the city, died of stomach cancer on July 19. He was 77, held the title of Professor Emeritus at UCSD and was artistic director of Common Ground Theatre, where he was at the center of African-American theater in San Diego.

Gaffney was recruited to UCSD in 1971 in response to interest in having a professor of dance and theater. There was not yet a formal department, but Gaffney was one of two instructors to offer classes in drama and dance.

"He was a jack-of-all-trades, teaching dance, directing, and African-American literature, and then he became the father of the city's African-American theater," said Allan Havis, who, when he joined UCSD in the 1980's, was assigned the office next door to Gaffney. "There was no professional black theater in San Diego before Floyd," said Havis now provost of UCSD Marshall College and professor of theater.

"Floyd was instrumental in the development of theater and dance at UCSD. He and one other instructor made up the whole faculty in 1971," said Arthur Wagner, who became founding chair of the new department in 1972. "When we started up there were still just a couple of us and we were doing everything. Floyd was already involved in teaching and was interested in helping in the community."

Over the years Gaffney taught both undergraduate students and graduate students in the highly regarded UCSD Master of Fine Arts theater program. He developed a reputation as a director who was able to identify talent. He was widely known as a mentor to student actors, directors and dancers, including television stars James Avery (a featured player in the sitcom "Prince of Bel Air") and John Houston (a star of television's "In the Heat of the Night"). Gaffney's formal retirement came in June, 1994 when he was named Professor Emeritus.

In 2006 Gaffney was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award as part of the KPBS Patté Awards for Theater Excellence. He was cited for "35 inspirational years of galvanizing the community with socially relevant theater" and "for bringing new voices to San Diego stages."

Gaffney directed more than 80 productions for Southeast Community Theatre, San Diego's oldest African-American troupe which started up in 1962. Under Gaffney's leadership, the group was renamed Common Ground Theater in 2004 to better reflect its grass-roots, cross-cultural mission. The current production at Common Ground, "Josephine Baker Tonight," directed by Gaffney, has been widely praised.

Gaffney's close friend Antonio T. J. Johnson, executive director of the San Diego Black Ensemble and a long-time local actor, said, "Floyd took actors and theatrical hopefuls and turned us into professionals. You became part of his family, and he held a whole community together."

Gaffney broke into theatrical work as a dancer in his native Cleveland at the Karamu House, a settlement playhouse which became a magnet for early African-American artists. Gaffney received the bachelor's and master's degrees in theater at Adelphi University in Garden City, Long Island. He gravitated to teaching in the field and, in 1966, earned a Ph.D. in theater at Carnegie Mellon University, then known as Carnegie Institution of Technology.

Gaffney had early teaching positions at Clark College in Atlanta, at Ohio University, in Athens, Ohio and UC Santa Barbara.

Gaffney and his wife, Yvonne, married in 1959. She was a long-time administrator at UCSD's Scripps Institution of Oceanography. They have been residents of Poway for four decades. All four of their children live in the San Diego area: Michele, of Escondio; Antoine of Poway; Brett of Solana Beach and Monique of Poway.

Funeral arrangements and details of a memorial service are pending.

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