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## Lessie Graham Pryor, nursing educator at Miami Dade College, dies at 68

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Lessie Graham Pryor, who retired as interim director of the nursing program at Miami Dade College, died on Wednesday at the age of 68.

The special love story that John Pryor and Lessie Graham Pryor shared began when they were just kids. He had spotted her at Dorsey Junior High when both their families were living in Liberty City. Then his family moved to Opa-locka, so that might have been that.

But one day, Lessie Louise Graham was introduced as the new student in one of his classes at North Dade Junior/Senior High School in Bunche Park. She was 13. So was he.

“I thought she was the prettiest girl I had ever seen,” Pryor said.

After she passed him a note in the hall that said “I like you,” he asked her to the movies. And from that day until Wednesday, when Lessie Pryor died after a three-year battle with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or Lou Gehrig’s disease), the couple went through life side by side.

They were part of each other’s lives for more than 55 years, married for the last 45. Together they raised sons Shawn and

Darrell, as well as an adopted daughter and son, Ottolita and Gary Thompson. They became the grandparents of four. They spent their working years as highly regarded educators at Miami Dade College, she in the School of Nursing at the Medical Center Campus, he on the theater faculty at Miami Dade North.

### ‘A GREAT LEGACY’

“She did incredible things at the nursing school, but she was quiet about it,” a grieving Pryor said on Saturday. “The students loved her. And my students called her ‘Mom.’”

Pryor's Miami Dade College colleagues, including President Eduardo Padrón, remember her as a compassionate and innovative educator who demanded her students meet high standards.

"She was not only an outstanding professor, but she left a great legacy. There are hundreds of nurses all over this town who trained under her," Padrón said. "She always insisted on high-quality teaching. She was very precious, just like John."

Fran Aronovitz, the retired director of Miami Dade College's School of Nursing, called Pryor "a role model and a mentor to many students and younger faculty members. If she saw potential in someone, she'd take them under her wing. ... She was probably the most determined person you'll ever meet. She used to say, 'I don't give up.'"

Kathie Sigler, retired president of the Medical Center Campus, said Pryor would make sure students got tutoring if they needed help. She fought for those who demonstrated their commitment to learning and to her high standards in patient care. She was ahead of many colleagues in embracing new technologies, active in statewide nursing organizations and in health fairs that provided free care to the uninsured. When Pryor retired from Miami Dade in 2007, she was serving as interim director of the nursing program, and Sigler said she and Pryor spent many workaholic days and evenings together.

"She'd outwork me, but it was fun working together. She had the nicest laugh and smile," Sigler said.

#### WHERE THE HEART IS

Shawn Pryor remembered his mother as a strong, compassionate woman and an excellent cook. He suspects that, because of her professional knowledge, she realized she had Lou Gehrig's disease long before she was diagnosed in 2010. He watched his father lovingly care for her as she lost the ability to use her arms, walk, eat and speak. Yet while she could still talk, each day she would say, "I'm OK." And she'd smile.

"That's what tears me up," her son said.

John Pryor, who has directed numerous plays for Miami's M Ensemble Company, spent the vast majority of his time at home after his wife's diagnosis. That's where his heart was, the same place it had been since he was 13. "She was my life. For 21½ years, 80 percent of my time was spent inside, because I was taking care of that lady. We were private people. We spent our lives together," he said.

Saturday would have been Pryor's 69th birthday. Her husband had a surprise planned for her: He had her wedding ring, which had been cut off before she had surgery several weeks ago, put back together so she could wear it again. Now he wears it on a chain around his neck.

In addition to her husband, children and grandchildren, Pryor is survived by her sister, Phyllis Larkins, and brothers Phillip Graham Jr. and Robert Graham.

A viewing will take place Sunday from 4 to 6 p.m. at the Hall Ferguson Hewitt Funeral Home, 1900 NW 54th St., Miami. A funeral service is set for Monday at 1 p.m. at Mount Hermon AME Church, 17800 NW 25th Ave., Miami Gardens.

Pryor's family asks that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the Lessie Graham Pryor Nursing and Scholarship Fund at the Miami Dade College Foundation, 300 NE Second Ave., Miami, FL 33132.

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