



WATERLOO - A seemingly unstoppable firebrand and civil rights leader, Jimmie Porter, would not be denied.

Not when fighting for workers' rights as a Rath Packing Co. union leader. Not during a 1972 civil rights protest that barricaded a Waterloo Schools superintendent in his office. Not when a group of blacks in the early 1970s blockaded Logan Plaza to protest hiring discrimination.

And certainly not when he established KBBG-FM 30 years ago, over warnings that the white community would never financially support the station. His wife, Lou, called KBBG - now a nationally recognized African-American radio station - his ultimate legacy.

"I think that Jimmie - humble as he was - in his heart of hearts, was most appreciative of the fact that he brought the radio station into being, because that had far-reaching effects and will continue," Lou Porter said. "I just think that had the most profound effect on the community and beyond."

Porter died Wednesday morning of complications from pneumonia. He was 76.

Porter never apologized for his confrontational and sometimes polarizing leadership style, which included sit-ins and picket lines in the late 1960s and '70s. It was a time in which blacks were denied employment for speaking with an "accent;" a time when black children attended segregated schools.

Opponents called him loud and obnoxious, but in a 1984 Courier profile, Porter said he simply did what needed to be done.

"I am not a leader in Waterloo's black community," he said. "I am a servant. I help the community determine its needs and accomplish goals they have set forth. My interest is to ensure all means are exercised to meet these goals."

There's no doubt about it: Porter was a man who got things done.

Born in Lexington, Miss., he moved to Waterloo in 1948. After hearing life was better for African-Americans in the north, he was disappointed to find blacks who accepted second-class status, he told Iowa Public Television for its 1984 special, "All Roads Lead to Jimmie Porter."

In 1968, Porter established UNI-CUE - University of Northern Iowa Center for Urban Education - to help low-income youth. He also helped create the Martin Luther King Center for vocation training of minority youth, the Logandale Apartment complex for low-income housing and the Lily Furgerson Day Care Center.

But it was his work as a community enabler, in which he helped bridge gaps between the white and black communities, where Porter accomplished most of his civil rights work.

Sit-ins resulted in the hiring of black school teachers in the Waterloo School District, and negotiations with faculty at the University of Northern Iowa resulted in its Equal Opportunity Program.

"Through the years, the hand of Jimmie Porter was evident in the relationship between the black and white community," said Louis Beecher, head of Beecher Law Firm. "He became very astute in identifying problems in black community, and resolving them in a reasonable way."

"There's still work to be done, as Jimmie said, but it's a lot better than it was," Beecher said.

Porter was also active in the Democratic Party, serving as a party delegate. In 1974, Iowa's Black Political Caucus named him its representative to the Democratic State Central Committee.

Porter's uncompromising style at times created rifts among people in both the white and black communities. He banned rap music on his radio station on principle, an edict that survives today, which upset some young people. When Harris Ceaser, KBBG station manager at the time, resigned in 1986, he accused Porter of running the station like a "dictatorship."

But it was Porter's deep respect for all people, no matter the political battle, friends said, that helped turn adversaries into friends. In the case of Ross Christensen, former Waterloo Board of Education president, that attitude fostered a mutual respect between two men that at times passionately disagreed on issues.

Christensen said he never knew Porter to be disrespectful, though Porter was "not adverse to yelling" to make his point. Their disagreements while Christensen served on the school board, though, always centered around the issue Porter fought for: Equal opportunities for Waterloo's black children.

"We didn't always agree - in fact we definitely didn't agree - but we did respect each other, and each other's opinion," he said. "I continue to have a great deal of respect for what Jimmie accomplished, particularly for the black community, but really for the entire community."

The pair became so close that Christensen volunteered to help launch the 1994 capital campaign for KBBG's new building. The gesture came in the wake of a car accident that killed lead fundraisers Harry Slife, a former Iowa state senator, and his wife, Polly.

KBBG became a life-long passion for Jimmie. Even as his health failed in recent years, he stayed involved in the station's major decisions. Betty Jean Furgerson, 80, a former Waterloo Human Rights commissioner and school board member, called KBBG Porter's greatest monument.

"He was never afraid to take risks that he knew would help others," she said. "He was very strongly motivated to do the things he felt were right."

Beecher, the attorney who helped KBBG obtain its federal license 30 years ago, said Porter also turned out to also be an astute businessman:



KBBG first started in the basement of an east Waterloo home, and after a planned expansion is completed, the station will live on at its million-dollar home on Newell Street for years to come.

"They took that station from a rundown house and a piece of second-hand antenna and equipment, and made it into what it is today," he said. "And that's Lou and Jimmie."