

LOCAL

Joan Canton, SWAG visionary, dies at 79

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Joan Canton, the visionary behind the development of the Southwest Advocacy Group and one of its co-founders, has died.

Canton, 79, died Saturday from cancer in Lake Worth.

A video presentation will honor Canton from 4-6 p.m. Friday at Forest Meadows Funeral Home at 725 NW 23rd Ave., said Joi Canton, one of Canton's daughters. A graveside service is set for 10 a.m. Saturday at Forest Meadows Cemetery, 4100 NW 39th Ave.

She will be cremated and join her deceased husband, Alric Orlando Canton, in one grave so that they are always together, Joi Canton said.

Joan Canton, namesake of a playground in the SWAG area, who co-founded the organization with Dorothy Benson, Alison Law, Dr. Nancy Hardt and others, was instrumental in developing a plan to help neighborhoods along Southwest 20th and 24th avenues where residents live with disparities in education, health, income and opportunity.

"To me, it's very important to not just overlook or dismiss children," Canton said in an interview with The Sun last year. "Now we can give people skills to help people help themselves."

Benson, another SWAG co-founder, said the resources now available in the SWAG community are due to Canton.

"Everything that has been built in the community to serve the residents there are because of the vision Joan had for the community," Benson said.

The vision Canton had for her community became a reality with the help of the Alachua County Commission and community organizations such as the Rotary Club, and has led to the establishment of a family resource center in Linton Oaks that opened in 2012 in some renovated apartments. The center is equipped with computers and internet access, after-

school tutoring programs, summer programs for kids, a food pantry, health and exercise programs, free notary services, counseling services and parenting support.

Canton's vision also included the establishment of a health clinic that was especially needed because a bus trip across town to the Alachua County Health Department in east Gainesville could take hours. The clinic is now open and offers pediatric dental, comprehensive family planning, nursing, WIC, birth certificate issuance and other services.

Canton's vision also led to a collaboration between the University of Florida and O2B Kids to establish the SWAG Child Center that was created to ensure the health and early education of children up to age 5.

All of the buildings are in Linton Oaks and serve it and the adjoining neighborhoods.

Canton was inspired to help others, especially needy children, because of the time she spent in an orphanage as a young girl in Saint Kitts island in the Caribbean, said Joi Canton.

"She knew there were other kids in the world who lived like her and she always wanted to help kids that did not have a lot," said Joi Canton, adding that her mother often took in other kids and even raised one, Ebony Ivory Almonds, of Gainesville, as her own.

Joan Canton was born in Antigua in the West Indies before spending a large portion of her childhood in an orphanage in Saint Kitts. She later immigrated to the Bronx, New York. She married Alric Orlando Canton on Aug. 26, 1961, and the couple had five daughters.

Besides Joi Canton, Joan Canton is survived by daughters Lisa Marie Canton, Kim Daniels, Dana Jones and Erika Canton, all of Gainesville; 12 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.