



## Helen V. Davis

April 20, 1927 - January 24, 2024

On January 24, 2024, Helen V. Davis, 96, a renowned Civil Rights advocate who fought against the system of Black oppression in Portsmouth, VA, passed away peacefully in her sleep. She was 96 years old. Helen was predeceased by her husband, Howard L. Davis, and siblings Eugene Vann, Ruth DeCambra, and Leslie Vann.

Helen was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and moved to Portsmouth with her family at an early age. She graduated from I.C. Norcom High School in 1944, and shortly after, she began her college education at Virginia Union University, Richmond, Virginia, and later continued her education at Norfolk State College and William and Mary Extension College. Helen was involved in the Central Civic Forum and the Independent Voter's League, where she taught Black citizens how to fill out voter registration cards. Helen became the first Female President of the organization. Helen's work in the Central Civic Forum was instrumental in getting the first two Black members of the Portsmouth City Council, along with the first Black Judge and Commonwealth Attorney. Helen, a champion of equal rights and social justice, supported and participated in the 1960 student protests against discrimination at the local Woolworth's store. She stepped in and marched on the picket line on behalf of the students to prevent them from getting expelled. Her untiring work in the Central Civic Forum changed the power structure in Portsmouth, VA.

Helen was a dedicated staff member in the Portsmouth School System, serving as a Librarian for over thirty years. Helen was a passionate advocate for education and young people. Following her retirement from the school system, she served as a member and Vice Chairman of the Portsmouth School Board, where she had an impactful role in appointing the first Black Superintendent for the Portsmouth Public School System. Helen was also the first Black female to serve on Maryview Hospital's Board of Directors. She was also a past member of the Urban League Board of Directors and Past President of the Portsmouth Chapter of Jack and Jill of America, Inc. Helen was a member of the Order of the Easter Star (OES), Brighton Light #118.

During the summer of 2020, when the Confederate Monument was finally removed in downtown Portsmouth, it was a culmination moment—something Helen and her peers fought to do for many years. It was a proud moment for her that she was able to witness. In 2023, Helen participated in the Repair Lab Oral History Project at the University of Virginia, where she shared her Civil Rights history. She and her daughter, Dianne, were also featured in the Portsmouth Coffee Talk Series, discussing their work in Civil Rights.

Helen enjoyed living life. She traveled throughout the United States with her family for leisure and on political and social justice matters. She also traveled internationally and enjoyed time in several countries. Helen loved music, particularly gospel and jazz. Helen kept her mind sharp and active by completing word search puzzles and staying updated on current political and entertainment affairs. She loved laughing, making jokes, and talking to her family and friends on the phone. Helen frequently checked up on others. She was known to send cards on special dates and "just because." She loved waterfront dining, steamed crabs, and crab cakes. Her longtime home was often the gathering place for family and friends. Helen was always an avid scholar and mastered the art of navigating social media at the age of 95, by becoming actively engaged daily in Facebook. Her Amazon Kindle was her

constant companion and she looked forward to keeping up with all the posted news from family and friends.

Helen found joy and purpose in working with others for the common good. She dedicated her life to the Lord, public service, and active community participation. In her many roles, she also was a public notary, speech writer, wedding planner, and family reunion organizer. Due to her upbeat, open, sincere, and frank nature, she was loved by many and was a counselor, coach, and confidante to those who knew her. She was an extended mother and grandmother to many people, a role that she was happy to serve in. Her impact lives on in her family, friends, community, and the countless lives she touched.

In a video interview with her granddaughter Lauren and great-granddaughter Aliya, Helen stated, "I have always depended on God, and He has always been a part of my life—in my obstacles and my accomplishments." She also shared these golden nuggets of wisdom: "Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you," and "Play the game of life fair and square."

Helen is survived by her daughters, Dr. Dianne Davis-Wagner (Joel Sr.) and Carolyn Davis Kelly (James); bonus daughter Barbara Bryce Coleman (Wesley), grandchildren Brian Davis Crump, Joel R. Wagner II, and Dr. Lauren Dianne Wagner, and great-granddaughter Aliya L. Wagner. She is also survived by her siblings Arthur Vann Sr, Wesley Vann Sr. (Suszan), Antoinette Jeffries, Howard Vann (Danile), and special adopted daughter Gayle Robinson. Helen leaves behind a dear friend, Lucille L. Mitchell, whom she talked to on the phone daily, friend Barbara Mabry, and numerous nieces, nephews, cousins, friends, and other family members.

Helen will be forever missed by those touched by her warm smile, laughter,

spirit, teachings, and advice. She was the ultimate example of a life well-lived.

The service will also be live-streamed on Ebenezer Baptist Church's YouTube Channel, Facebook page, and official church website. We kindly ask guests to wear a mask at the service.

# Cemetery Details

## Greenlawn Memorial Gardens

3920 Airline Blvd  
Chesapeake, VA

# Previous Events

## Visitation

JAN 31. 3:00 PM - 6:00 PM (ET)

J.T. Fisher Funeral Services  
1248 N. George Washington Hwy.  
Chesapeake, VA 23323  
(757) 487-3700  
info@jtfisherfuneralservices.com  
<https://www.jtfisherfuneralservices.com>

## Service

FEB 1. 11:00 AM (ET)

Ebenezer Baptist Church  
728 Effingham Street  
Portsmouth, VA

# Tribute Wall



“ J.T. Fisher Funeral Services created a Tribute Video in memory of Helen V. Davis



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**J. T. Fisher Funeral Services** - January 31, 2024 at 05:18 PM



*The James E. Wynn, Sr. family extend their deepest heart- felt condolences to the Vann-Davis family. Our father and Mrs. Davis were childhood friends. Mrs. Davis was " such a lovely friend" and advocate to the Wynn family. Her bubbly affection will ever be remembered 😊. Go on, my dearest and take your rest. Your work on earth is done and greatly appreciated. Now, your joy is full and everlasting.*

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**Valerie Adrian Wynn** - January 31, 2024 at 08:56 PM



“ Ms. Davis wanted to go home. She got her wish. No need for weeping and wailing . No sorrow . No pain. God bless you all.

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**Pat Burns** - January 31, 2024 at 02:47 PM



“ Veronica Hawkins sent a virtual gift in memory of Helen V. Davis



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**Veronica Hawkins** - January 31, 2024 at 10:03 AM

VH

“ I was having a difficult time falling asleep. Aunt Helen is on my mind. I decided to write my thoughts about her. Writing has always been very therapeutic for me. Aunt Helen has always been a part of my life; however, since 2010 when my mother, Mrs. Ruth December transitioned, my Aunt Helen became my "rock". We talked almost weekly. Sometimes our conversations were quite lengthy, particularly, if we were talking about politics. She would say, " Lord, I don't know what this world is coming to. If certain people get back in the White House all Black people will have to pack our bags and go back to the Mother Land". We would chuckle and say, " What would we do there"? My Aunt Helen and my Mom represented the true sense of being 'strong Black women'. Both had deep convictions that they lived by and didn't hesitate to share them. My Aunt Helen is described as an civil rights advocate, what a perfect description. When I graduated from high school and was 18, my aunt made sure I became a registered voter. Her conviction regarding the importance of voting became equally as important to me. I volunteered to work with my Aunt registering Black residents in areas where voting was not the norm. I continued to discuss the importance of being a registered voter to my classmates in college because my Aunt Helen imparted that in me. I could go on about all that my Aunt Helen means to me; however, space won't allow that. My Aunt Helen will be in my heart forever. Her Celebration of Life service is being held on such a befitting day, the beginning of Black History Month. To my cousins, Dianne and Carolyn, you know I am here for you. Love Veronica (Ronnie)

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**Veronica Haywood Hawkins** - January 31, 2024 at 04:15 AM

EF

“ Eugene, Sundra and Family planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Helen V. Davis.

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**Eugene, Sundra and Family** - January 30, 2024 at 11:26 PM

EF

“ Eugene, Sundra and Family purchased the Basket of Memories for the family of Helen V. Davis.



Eugene, Sundra and Family - January 30, 2024 at 11:26 PM

PF

“ Petra & Harvey Family purchased the Sweet Tenderness for the family of Helen V. Davis.



Petra & Harvey Family - January 30, 2024 at 07:53 PM



“ 30 files added to the album Life Tributes




J. T. Fisher Funeral Services - January 30, 2024 at 04:46 PM

DM

“ *DONNA MENDES-ROSE lit a candle in memory of Helen V. Davis*



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**DONNA L MENDES-ROSE** - January 30, 2024 at 03:20 PM

 Donna Mendes-Rose

“ *I spent New Years with Mrs. Helen. My entire family has met her and fallen in love with this incredibly warm loving and caring human being. May she rest in peace. Donna Mendes-Rose*

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**Donna Mendes-Rose** - January 30, 2024 at 03:16 PM

EH

“ *Eva Teig Hardy planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Helen V. Davis.*

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**Eva Teig Hardy** - January 30, 2024 at 08:41 AM

EH

“ *Eva Teig Hardy purchased the Arrive in Style for the family of Helen V. Davis.*



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**Eva Teig Hardy** - January 30, 2024 at 08:41 AM

MA

“ I was saddened to learn of Helen Davis' passing. Helen was a wonderful friend to my late wife and I, and I will cherish the fond memories that we shared. My heartfelt sympathies to her family and friends.



M. Larry Anderson - January 29, 2024 at 06:35 PM

SD

“ ShaVonne Doughty lit a candle in memory of Helen V. Davis



ShaVonne Doughty - January 28, 2024 at 08:02 PM

M?

“ MIRIAM Jiggetts lit a candle in memory of Helen V. Davis



MIRIAM Jiggetts ▲ - January 28, 2024 at 05:25 PM

IV

“ Diane and Carolyn. I was grieved to hear about the passing of your mom. She was always a good friend to me. I'll be keeping your family in prayer. May God bless and strengthen each of you.



Irine Vaughan - January 26, 2024 at 05:51 PM

BC

“ *Brenda Carter lit a candle in memory of Helen  
V. Davis*



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**Brenda Carter** - January 25, 2024 at 04:50 PM