



Nikki Giovanni

June 7, 1943 - December 9, 2024

Nikki Giovanni, second daughter of Yolande Watson and Jones "Gus" Giovanni was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on June 7, 1943. Named for her mother and dubbed "Nikki" by her older sister, she grew up in Cincinnati and Knoxville. She passed away peacefully on December 9, 2024, with her life-long partner, Virginia [Ginney] Fowler, by her side. Up until the very end, Nikki maintained her kindness and grace, passion and compassion, independence and self-assurance.

As a child, Nikki's tremendous discipline and self-determination was matched only by her proclivity for solitude. It was in these moments, and in between the stacks of her local library—which she loved—where her writerly creativity was birthed. In the sixth grade, she was taught by Sister Althea Augustine, an Episcopal nun, who recognized and nurtured Nikki's genius; she even taught twelve-year-old Nikki how to drive. Nikki's grandmother, Emma Louvenia Watson, was the other significant influence in her life. It was Nikki's grandmother who took her in when Nikki decided she could no longer bear to watch the domestic violence in her home.

She attended Austin High School, where her grandfather taught Latin, until the end of her junior year when she was invited to attend Fisk University as an early entrant. During this time, Nikki edited the literary magazine and reestablished a chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

After graduating from Fisk, she entered Columbia University's MFA program and self-published her first two collections of poetry. Despite the sexism pervasive in the Black Arts Movement, which eventually compelled Giovanni to move away from it, her initial identification with its values popularized it in ways never anticipated by its founders.

During the 1970s, inspired by her experiences as an aunt, and a single mother to her newborn son, Thomas Giovanni, she began writing children's literature, publishing several collections of poems, including *Spin a Soft Black Song* and *Ego-Tripping and other Poems for Young People*. Her gold certified album, *Truth is on Its Way*, featured Nikki reading her poetry juxtaposed to spirituals and gospel sung by the New York Community Choir.

Her books were perennial best sellers, published in several languages, always reflecting the universal and the intimate, the tragedy and the triumph. The common thread running through books like *Bicycles*, *Chasing Utopia*, and *A Good Cry* was quite naturally love: romantic, playful, familial, and cultural.

For almost six decades, Giovanni's poems, prose, and speeches gave us an imaginative, fearless, unadulterated voice. She was poet and activist, teacher and television host, highly sought-after public speaker and Grammy-nominee. In 1987, Giovanni was recruited to teach creative writing and literature at Virginia Tech, retiring thirty-six years later as a University Distinguished Professor and beloved member of the New River Valley Community.

A proud, honorary member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., she received hundreds of awards, prizes, and thirty-one honorary doctorates, the most recent recognition, a 2024 Emmy for the HBO documentary *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*.

Nikki Giovanni was good at many things and she was exceptionally good at

love. Throughout her life, she remained a humble servant of her readers, signing every book, taking every photo. Nikki was generous with her poetry, money, and most significantly her time. She was intentional about treating everyone with kindness and dignity—not only family and fellow writers but also the clerk at the post office, the bagger at the grocery store, the custodians on campus—every person felt seen by her, and important to her.

With all her accomplishments and success, what mattered most to Nikki was quality time with the people she loved. She brought the same zeal and passion from the page and stage to the kitchen table where she displayed her mastery at the card game Bid Whist and the art of “trash talking” with opponents. Friends and family loved eating Nikki’s home-cooked meals, especially her rack of lamb and fried chicken, and cherished the handwritten notes she mailed on birthdays, special occasions or just because.

Nikki once wrote, “i know i’m bold/coming on like this/but the good things in life/are too good to be missed.” Indeed, Nikki Giovanni was a good thing in this life, and she will be missed. She spun a song so divine and ethereal, we will be listening to her legacy long after her leaving.

Ms. Giovanni is survived by her wife, Virginia Fowler, her son Thomas Giovanni, her granddaughter, Kai Giovanni, two cousins, Haynes Ford, his wife Delores, their daughter Chantel, and granddaughter Mia; Allison [Pat] Ragan, her husband Beau, their children, Zachary, Lauren and husband John Wilkerson, their children Aria and Kobe, and a nephew Christopher Black.

In her poetry book, *The Women and The Men*, Nikki wrote “i hope i die warmed by the life that i tried to live.” Indeed Nikki Giovanni, once called “The Princess of Black Poetry,” left this life with the warmth of a thousand suns, and a legacy that will shine in our lives eternally.

A visitation will be held on Saturday, December 14, 2024, from 5-7:00 PM in the McCoy Funeral Home.

Previous Events

Visitation

DEC **14**. 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

McCoy Funeral Home
150 Country Club Dr. S.W.
Blacksburg, VA 24060
(540) 552-3211
mccoyfuneralhome@verizon.net
<https://mccoyfuneralhome.com>

Tribute Wall

EL

“ I remember seeing Nikki on three occasions when she visited college campuses in Texas back in the 70s and 80s. Known then as the "princess of black poetry", as diminutive as she was she strode onto the stage and commanded a presence. The first time I saw her (ETSU) she was wearing a lime green pantsuit that was cut and tailored to perfection that I bought a Singer, learned to sew, and made one for myself!

The last time I saw her was at UNT and there was a thunderstorm during her performance, but we came out in droves anyway. Later that evening I was invited over to the sponsor's house where Nikki was, and we played cars until about 2am. She talked much shit while playing spades. Fond memories.

Elwood - January 13, 2025 at 12:48 PM

GD

“ Our family is deeply saddened by the loss of Nikki. She and her family were so kind and generous, especially to my parents, Rice and Ethel Dobbins. May God give you comfort and peace.

Glenwood Dobbins - December 30, 2024 at 10:58 AM

SA

“ My Deepest Thoughts and Prayers to Nikki Giovanni and her family. I was introduced to your poetry and Angela Davis' writings in Junior high school. You were a beacon of light needed in this dark world. Thank God he Blessed us with you for a time and Rest Peacefully in The Arms of our Heavenly Father, I know You , Maya and Toni will be Dancing in the wind. Amen. 🙏💜🕊️

Sabrina - December 29, 2024 at 03:36 AM

RR

“ You were my favorite living poet; you made me want to be a writer and opened up inner worlds for me. Rest in Peace and ride those night winds sweet gemini woman

Roscoe Rossi - December 24, 2024 at 01:53 PM

CK

“ Heartfelt condolences to Ms. Ginny, her son, Thomas, granddaughter and the rest of the family...from her ancestral home town of Albany, Georgia. I interviewed Ms. Nikki 18 months before her passing for my film entitled "Why Nikki Giovanni Was Not Born In Albany, Georgia". See the trailer below. Clennon L. King | AugustineMonica Films
<https://vimeo.com/1039665574>

Clennon L King - December 24, 2024 at 10:09 AM

CA

“ I met her once when she was a guest speaker at Wichita State University in Wichita, KS. I was in my 20s I think. After her speech/poetry reading, I went up to her to shake her hand. She responded to me with a warmth I will never forget. I have loved her writings my whole life. I have long held a dream of one day going on a get-away to a log cabin with fellow writers Ms. Nikki, Ms. Alice Walker, and Ms. Maya Angelou. In my dream we were all gathered around a vibrant fire in our pjs, sipping warm drinks, and enjoying one another's company. Sad that she has left without this dream coming true. But thankful I met her and that she left myself and the world so many gifts. Rest well Ms. Nikki. - C. Loraine Adams

Charollette Adams - December 22, 2024 at 11:19 AM

FT

“ *RIP sister Nikki.*



frank Titus - December 22, 2024 at 08:48 AM

YC

“ *My condolences to the family. Nikki is my favorite poet and kindred Gemini twin. She has touched the lives of so many people she never knew during her book signings and public appearances. I am grateful she will always be a positive memory and cherish the photo I took with her at Mount Zion Baptist Church in Seattle in 1999. Keeping you in my prayers.*
Yvonne Ervin Carr

Yvonne Ervin Carr - December 21, 2024 at 08:59 PM

M'

“ *As I reflect on the time I met Ms. Nikki Giovanni, the Poet, I remember her being very quiet yet pleasant and kind. What a wonderful way to be. May she always be remembered in our thoughts. Until then.. Rest in Power my dear faraway friend.*

Maya C Bey, VSU '97 - December 20, 2024 at 10:46 AM

GF

“ As I celebrate the life of Nikki Giovanni, I need to say thank you to her for providing me with a time of celebration in mine. All the things that made her who and what she was, were always inside of her no matter the age. My experience with her and because of her was something that has lasted in my mind throughout the years. Her graciousness and wiliness to help, lit fires in everyone she encountered. 1971 in Lincoln Heights, Ohio Treva Thompson and I put together a girls' softball team warmly known as the Encore Tigers of Lincoln Heights and from that effort, we were blessed to receive her kindness as she purchased the uniforms for that team. She rocked her personal and professional life, and it was wonderful to know her. Much Love Always ~ Gwen Saunders - Freeman

Gwen Saunders - Freeman - December 19, 2024 at 01:48 PM

WE

“ William E. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Nikki Giovanni.

William E. - December 18, 2024 at 10:51 PM

RP

“ My sincere condolences to Virginia and the family.

Rocky Price - December 17, 2024 at 04:58 PM

D.

“ An influencer, one of a kind who embraced life. See you in the next place. Peace N.G.

D.H. - December 17, 2024 at 01:32 PM

KM

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Karla Merchant-Parrish - December 16, 2024 at 10:36 PM

KM

It was a pleasure meeting Nikki in October 2018, when she did a speaking engagement @ Edward Waters University in Jacksonville Florida. Cherish her forever 💕

Karla Merchant-Parrish - December 16, 2024 at 10:40 PM

AA

“ Condolences to all those who loved Nikki and to all those she loved.

Angie Ali - December 16, 2024 at 12:16 PM

AA

“ *I called Nikki a week before her death and we talked a bit. Throughout the years, we had many conversations, exchanged many letters; and, I received many books from her. My husband and I usually attended her local presentations. She was a generous, unique artist with a defiant spirit and a down-to-earth, sweet personality. I will miss her sisterhood, her humor and just knowing she was in the world, full of opinions, speaking and writing against injustices and sharing her feelings and experiences. It is sad to say goodbye to such a special friend as Nikki Giovanni.*

Angie Moore Ali and Mustafa (Neal McAlpin Jr.)



Angie Ali - December 16, 2024 at 12:08 PM

DW

“ Thank you Niki Giovanni for opening our eyes to the truth with a loving spirit. May God's loving grace allow your smile to reunite with pasted loved ones. Here's a verse from one of my poems "If You Were Love", If you were a vision I'd make you all that I could see, And if you were love I'd keep you inside of me. Blessings, and Peace Dwight Wright wrightbooks.com



Dwight Wright - December 16, 2024 at 11:23 AM

AS

My Heart beats with every thought & LOVE of your SPIRIT. (RIP)
Beautiful lady...Missing you always. 🎵🎹🌹❤️🙏

Aralene Staley - December 20, 2024 at 08:11 PM

AS

RIP-Nikki

Aralene Staley - December 20, 2024 at 08:21 PM

DH

“ Nikki, I admired you because you spoke your truth with class and confidence. Thank you for giving the world your elegant expressions! I am so glad that I have several pictures with you...--
Donna

Donna Hardy - December 16, 2024 at 02:37 AM

MA

“ *Myron and Althea Anderson purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of Nikki Giovanni.*



Myron and Althea Anderson - December 15, 2024 at 08:22 PM

MM

“ *My deepest condolences to Ginney on this heartbreaking loss.*

*Marge Murray
Virginia Tech 1983–2004
Iowa City IA*

Marge Murray - December 15, 2024 at 08:05 PM



“ *I was so blessed to have heard her speak a couple of times. I read her poem, Knoxville, Tennessee every year to my students.*

Summer Moore - December 15, 2024 at 07:36 PM

NH

“ *Ms. Nikki, thank you for sharing your talent with the world and for being humanity's North Star.*

Nancy Hite-Norde - December 15, 2024 at 04:26 PM

MS

I simply adored Nikki Giovanni when I was a teenager--and my mother knew it. So when my mother saw Sister Nikki in line at a bank, Mommy asked for an autograph on my behalf. To say that I was thrilled was an understatement.

The obituary for Sister Nikki was phenomenal. I loved learning that she was such a kind person, AND talked trash while playing bid whist! Blessings to Sister Nikki and you, her family

MutShat Shemsut - December 15, 2024 at 04:50 PM

BT

“ *I had the opportunity to introduce Nikki Giovanni in February 2009 at the Sankofa Awards in tulsa, Ok. She loved my introduction so much she asked me to send her a copy. I did.*

To her family, know that she has touched the world and in doing so brought it to your house. Some smiles, some tears but always life in its fullness. We share her with you and want you to know that the Universe has embraced her love for you as we have. Grieve for the moment and love for eternity. Barbara Eikner Thompson and Don Thompson.



Barbara Eikner Thompson - December 14, 2024 at 09:52 PM

ES

A beautiful woman with so many powerful words, words to live by may the lord receive your soul and rest in peace queen and God bless those around you amen.

Ellesse steward - December 15, 2024 at 02:17 AM

EJ

“ To the family and close friends,
A good friend and neighbor to all in the New River Valley left a beautiful legacy to our Valley. A great friend to all who knew her and loved her contributions too numerous to name. God's blessings be with you during this time of sorrow. Erma Jones

Erma Lee Jones - December 14, 2024 at 06:31 PM

EW

“ Dear Nikki,
You are Blessed with the ability to make 'Words', 'Feel', through your Talents
of Communicating with Grace, always delivering with the Softness of a
Rose Peddle, and a Spine of Steel !

Thank You,
Elbert Washington
Brooklyn, New York

Elbert Washington - December 14, 2024 at 02:09 PM

TS

I have been inspired by her humble life and her great words in her books and powerful poems. She will be remembered for her impact on those of us left her. My condolences is with her son. It is nothing more painful when you loose your mother...

Teresa Scruggs - December 14, 2024 at 04:17 PM

JM

From childhood to an adult. She was one of best poet in my living. She shared the best stories, all on point. You can feel the impact of her words.

Thanks for the power and the energy you leave for favorite fans!

We will hold every word near our hearts!

Rest in the awesome words we give to you.

You became a part of our poetic minds. My great example, thanks for inspiring me. Rest in Love.

Judy McCullough - December 15, 2024 at 12:42 PM

JA

During my hours of loneliness and need to embrace the jocundity of living, I read and embraced Ms. Giovanni's lyrical, deeply honest poetry. It was always a song of life and love that woke me fresh and new.

janice - December 15, 2024 at 01:39 PM



“ *I did no know Nikki personally, but when introduced to her writings, I was an immediate admirer. She was bold and fearless and helped me be unafraid as I faced life alone with my first born daughter. Those were the days.....*

Rose Smith-Hayes - December 14, 2024 at 10:43 AM

CA

“ *Christina Anderson purchased the Beautiful Dreams for the family of Nikki Giovanni.*



Christina Anderson - December 14, 2024 at 09:41 AM

CA

“ Christina Anderson planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Nikki Giovanni.

Christina Anderson - December 14, 2024 at 09:41 AM

WS

“ Wintergreen Sisters purchased the Full Of Love Bouquet for the family of Nikki Giovanni.



Wintergreen Sisters - December 13, 2024 at 10:08 PM

SS

“ Sophia S. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Nikki Giovanni.

Sophia S. - December 13, 2024 at 08:07 PM

SA

“ I am grateful for her immense contributions to our world. She inspired a whole generation of educators and made the literary world richer.

sarah - December 13, 2024 at 07:43 PM



“ Enchanted Cottage was purchased for the family of Nikki Giovanni.



December 13, 2024 at 06:11 PM



“ A [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) was planted in honor of Nikki Giovanni.

December 13, 2024 at 06:11 PM



“ We are saddened to hear of the loss of such a Pilar! May her legacy live on through her writings! Rest in Peace Nikki Giovanni- Petersburg Public Library



Raleigh Desper - December 13, 2024 at 04:49 PM



“ Strength & Solace Spray was purchased for the family of Nikki Giovanni.



December 13, 2024 at 03:06 PM



“ A [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) was planted in honor of Nikki Giovanni.

December 13, 2024 at 03:06 PM

JL

“ *My sincerest condolence to the family. Soror Giovanni will ne missed by many!*

Joanell Lawson - December 13, 2024 at 02:28 PM

NR

“ *Please accept my heartfelt condolences on the loss of your loved one! She was an icon to the Hokie Nation. A legend that will be remembered forever!*

NRV Citizen

NRV - December 13, 2024 at 02:11 PM