

H-F community loses hero: A tribute to Ngozi Okorafor

If you're a sports fan, you may be familiar with the DirecTV ad constantly running in which a couple watches streaming live TV and streaming movies, and the two blur. "Serena Williams ... Wonder Woman ... Serena ... Wonder Woman." Memorably, a tennis ball spills John McEnroe's drink and he

VIEWPOINT



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And all I can think of is my friend Ngozi Okorafor, who passed away too early on Nov. 23. A six-foot-tall Amazon black tennis player who became a labor lawyer and public servant, Ngozi's life force exemplifies both of their stories, Serena's and Wonder Woman's. Like so many of her friends and family, the news of Ngozi's passing prompted the McEnroe response for me: "No! You can't be serious!"

I met Ngozi at college 30 years ago, when she came to Yale as a tennis player on the women's team. We met in an African-American studies class, where her immediate take was, "What are you doing here?"

Shortly thereafter, I heard about Homewood-Flossmoor High School and what a special place she was from. A month later, Serena turned pro. Ngozi alternated between trumpeting the accomplishments of the Williams sisters on the tennis court, supported by her own pride in being a Division 1 athlete at an elite educational institution, and challenging, "Defend yourself!" to me, to Yale, to anyone whose ideas didn't make sense to her, or to everyone who jumped to conclusions without thinking them through.



Ngozi Okorafor

She was smart, witty, indefatigable and delightful. Her gigantic smile lit up a room – and owned it. She had friends everywhere, and anyone walking down the sidewalk could come into the scope of her invitations, interruptions, interrogatories: "Hey you! Who are you? What are you doing to be the best self you can be? What do you think about the issues of today?"

Ngozi hit a strong forehand and struck a strong student profile. She took very seriously her role as a Black student on a historic campus, situated in one of America's poorest cities and richest states. Equity was her byline, and calling out unfair realities presaged her time as a labor lawyer and public servant.

One of the pinnacles of our student experience was a class called "Power, Marginalization and Resistance." The 40-student course was co-taught by Cathy Cohen (then the only openly gay young African-American associate professor at Yale and now an eminent political scientist at the University of

Chicago) and an older male anthropologist who spent 30 years working in a Southeast Asian village.

The student group included a cadre of intimidating, whip-smart graduate students, and it was one of the few seminars on campus where students of color predominated. We got after the older professor for his references to the village he'd researched as "my village," and the debates raged from there.

Ngozi was in her element, taking on older students and all comers: "Defend your point!"

Returning home after graduating from Yale, Ngozi would take this activist spirit to get her law degree and master's degree in Labor Relations at the University of Illinois. Wonder Woman meets labor advocate.

Through a career as a lawyer and government official, Ngozi led service days, held leadership positions and received awards from the institutions that make our communities better places to live: the Cook County Bar

Association, the oldest African-American bar association in America; the Black Women Lawyer's Association; and the Junior League of Chicago.

Indeed, Ngozi, whose name means Blessing in the Igbo language, is a superhero. In the high-achieving Okorafor family, her sister — talented science fiction author and local resident Nnedi — created "Ngozi," the first Nigerian superhero in Marvel's universe, before the Black Panther film was released.

The comic story "Blessing in Disguise" celebrates diversity and strength by a female lead. It's clear how Nnedi was inspired by her sister.

These are Ngozi: Homewood-Flossmoor High School State Tennis Champion as a team member and as doubles player in 1989-90; Yale graduate and proud member of a successful tennis program; recipient of advanced degrees in law and labor relations; mother of an endearing young boy; and friend to thousands (who ever heard of someone not named Serena with 5,000 Facebook friends?).

Ngozi's example — as a tennis athlete, as a mother, as a friend and a public servant — represents the best that we have to offer, from Olympia Fields, Homewood-Flossmoor, Yale, America and her family homeland of Nigeria.

Departing from us too soon, but not to be forgotten — hers was a legacy life, one that inspires because her intensity and example were so indisputable. May she Rest In Peace and Power, may her friends and family be comforted in their mourning and exalted in their celebrations of her living, and may we all live better for having come into contact with her story.

Ngozi is survived by her mother, siblings, partner and her 8-year-old son, Chinedu, and I invite you to join me in supporting the GoFundMe campaign set up by the family to meet his present and future needs.

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