Life Story

Born July 19,1930 in Medford, Massachusetts to Lt. Colonel Edward Dugger and Madeline Mabray Kountze, Ione Theresa Dugger spent her 95 years of life blazing trails and helping others. She married William Vargus in 1954, and became a devoted mother to their children, Suzanne and Billy, while she was still working on her Master's degree in social service administration at the University of Chicago.

Always an innovator, her style of working with families as a social worker in Chicago and then Boston was unconventional and controversial but gradually became accepted practice.

In 1971, she earned a Ph.D. from Brandeis University in social work. While at Brandeis she was asked by the black students who had taken over a building and issued a list of demands to negotiate with the administration. These demands included the establishment of a black studies department for which she became one of the founding faculty. She then took a position as Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois. She would make history in 1978, when Temple University named her the Dean of the School of Social Administration, the first African American and first female dean in school history.

While others focused on her historical achievements, Dr. Vargus focused on her work. "I had a job to do," she said.

She did that job so well that after 13 years as Dean, she was made Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Education, and Presidential Fellow.

Divorced, she married Bill Adams in 1978. He was her biggest fan and advocate. Sadly, tragedy struck when Bill passed in 1988.

She received too many honors and awards to mention them all, but in 2015, Temple's College of Public Health held an event honoring her life's work.

The importance of education was always stressed in her tight-knit family; her mother, Madeline Dugger, had graduated law school in 1931 even though no law firm at that time would hire a black person. So, it was only natural that Dr. Vargus became very interested in the role family reunions played in communicating cultural values and maintaining bonds. She created The Family Reunion Institute in 1990 under Temple's auspices.

For 17 years, she and a group of volunteers produced conferences on family reunions in Philadelphia expanding to other locations throughout the country such as Atlanta and Pittsburgh. The late Philadelphia Inquirer columnist Claude Lewis called her "The Mother of Family Reunions."

The Institute eventually became a separate non-profit, the National Family Reunion Institute (NFRI), which still offers advice for reunion planning through it 's website https://nationalfamilyreunioninstitute.net. NFRI also holds free virtual workshops for reunion planners. In addition, it has been invited by corporations, government organizations, genealogical groups, and non-profits to present on black family reunions.

Dr. Vargus' research included traveling to countless family reunions over the course of several years and interviewing participants. This resulted in her publishing a book in 2020, "Black Family Reunions: Finding the Rest of Me."

Of course, Dr. Vargus was most committed to her own family, helping to send her three granddaughters, Jasminn Cooper and Stephanie Holloman and Nia Vargus, to college. Each of them received a new car from "Granny Ione" upon graduation.

Her daughter-in-law, Sue Serio Vargus of Fox 29 TV said, "Ma was the most remarkable person I ever met."

She is cherished by her two children, Suzanne Vargus Holloman (Rev. Stephen Holloman) and Bill Vargus (Sue Serio); three granddaughters Jasminn Cooper (Jeremy Cooper), Stephanie Holloman, and Nia Vargus, and great grandson Julius Lee Cooper; and devoted nephews, nieces, cousins, friends, colleagues and mentors.

Suzanne and Billy adored their mother and wish to thank all who came to her funeral and/or expressed their condolences. Our whole lives, we've never stopped meeting people who said," Your Mom helped me so much."