

James H. Kelch Jr., Temple professor emeritus, community activist, and philanthropist, has died at 85

(November 25, 2023)

He pioneered the social work curriculum at Temple and practiced what he preached. “Jim truly lived the social justice and human rights foci of social work,” a former colleague said.



Professor Kelch had an engaging personality, and friends recall his big laugh and sense of humor. Courtesy of the family

by [Gary Miles](#)

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James H. Kelch Jr., 85, of Philadelphia, professor emeritus of social work at Temple University, longtime community activist, and philanthropist, died Saturday, Nov. 25, of sudden heart failure at Einstein Medical Center.

Over six decades, from the 1960s until recently, Professor Kelch combined his groundbreaking teaching career, extensive public service, and significant charitable contributions to impact thousands of students, local residents, and community-based organizations. He was one of the first professors when Temple's School of Social Administration, now the School of Social Work, was founded in 1969, and he earned the Laura H. Carnell Professorship in 2000 for excellence in "research, scholarship, the creative arts, and teaching."

An organizer and natural negotiator, he represented the university in [talks with students and neighbors](#) when Temple expanded its campus in 1970, and cochaired the 1976 committee that planned the school's participation in the city's Bicentennial celebration. He retired in 2000 but continued to teach part time until 2008.

He also taught at Immaculata University and at the University of Pennsylvania. "We believe we can mentor people who will use their professional practice to change society," he said in a [2017 interview](#) posted online by Temple's College of Public Health. "My emphasis was always on the societal impacts of ideas and forces, and how things could be made better for the ordinary person."



Professor Kelch (front, center) poses with his sisters and parents. Courtesy of the family

With his wife, Beverly, also an educator and activist, Professor Kelch championed achievement and progress through education and activism. "He was a brilliant man who understood the depth,

causes, and traumas surrounding racism and inequality,” former Temple colleague Lois Millner said in an [online tribute](#). “He encouraged his students to make a real difference in the world.”

He worked as a staff planner for neighborhood development on Philadelphia’s Areawide Council of the Model Cities Program in 1967 and consulted throughout his career with the National Association of Social Workers. In 1988, he headed a city-appointed search committee to find a new head for the Department of Human Services.

Privately, Professor Kelch created educational scholarships and community awards in memory of his wife after her death in 1997. In 1999, he established the Beverly Gail Barnes Kelch Memorial Lecture Series in which prominent speakers address important issues on the arts, politics, the environment, and social progress. “To the extent that you are exposed to those different facets of life,” he said in his 2017 interview with Temple, “you’re better prepared to deal with them.”

He also donated to Temple’s College of Public Health, Episcopal Community Services, Bread & Roses Community Fund, and other organizations. His daughter Kuae Noel said: “He was an introvert, quiet and intellectual. He was the smartest man I know.”



Professor Kelch and his wife, Beverly, were married for 38 years. Courtesy of the family

James Hobson Kelch Jr. was born June 9, 1938, in Germantown. He graduated from Central High School, studied zoology and philosophy, and earned a bachelor’s degree at Howard University in Washington. He spent a year at medical school but acknowledged an aptitude for

personal engagement and went on to earn a master's degree in social services and community organization at Bryn Mawr College in 1967.

He met Beverly Barnes at a party at Howard when she noticed he was doing the Philly Bop. They married in 1959, raised daughters Kuae Noel and Karia, and son Khai, and lived in Wynnefield. "He taught us all how to love through the love he had for our mother," said Karia.

"The work that social workers do impacts every facet of life."

Professor James H. Kelch Jr. in 2017

Professor Kelch attended the famous [March on Washington in 1963](#) and was a lifelong friend of civil rights leader Timothy L. Jenkins. He was an avid reader of Black history and admired writers Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, and W.E.B. Dubois.

He enjoyed jazz, especially on Temple's WRTI radio station, and his children recall car rides filled with music from the dashboard radio. "Professor Jim Kelch was a cool cat," his family said in a tribute.

He liked to cook string beans, black-eyed peas, and split pea soup. He wrote poetry to his wife, and they hosted memorable dinner parties and played pinochle long into the night.

He liked to laugh, and friends said "his smile lit up the room." He played basketball at Howard, went to the Penn Relays almost every year, and read the newspaper from front to back every day.



Professor Kelch (right) and Timothy L. Jenkins (center) were lifelong friends who attended reunions at Howard University and other events for years. Courtesy of the family

Colleagues called him “a shining light of kindness and social justice” and “a great person who gave much and asked for nothing.” His son Khai said: “He has always been a hero to me. He taught me that humility, kindness, sacrifice, and love are given without question.”

In addition to his children, Professor Kelch is survived by five grandchildren and other relatives. Four sisters died earlier. Three brothers died in infancy.

Services were held Friday, Dec. 8.

Donations in his name may be made to [Episcopal Community Services](#), Attn: Carol Neilson, 225 S. Third St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19106; and [Howard University](#), Box 22960, New York, N.Y. 10087.



Professor Kelch wrote poetry to his wife and doted on his children and grandchildren.
Courtesy of the family