



## How 'Raisin in the Sun' author Lorraine Hansberry defined what it meant to be 'young, gifted and black'

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Lorraine Hansberry, the first African American woman playwright to have a play performed on Broadway, would be turning 89 on Sunday if she were still alive today. The play, of course, was the brilliant drama "A Raisin in the Sun."

Opening at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, "A Raisin in the Sun" won Hansberry the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play, garnered four Tony Awards (Best Play, Best Direction/Lloyd Richards, Best Actor/Sidney Poitier and Best Actress/Claudia McNeil), was translated in 35 different languages, and has been performed all over the world.

The play's title comes from a line of poetry by the great Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes entitled "**Harlem**:"

*What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?*

Hansberry's play tells the story of an African American family living in a cramped rental apartment in Chicago. The matriarch hopes to buy a house in a predominantly white neighborhood but cannot because of the racially restrictive covenants of the day.

The play was based on the experiences of Lorraine's father, Carl Augustus Hansberry, who was a successful real estate broker in Chicago. In 1938, he purchased a home in the predominantly white Washington Park subdivision of the Woodlawn section of Chicago's south side. Soon after, the Hansberry family was exposed to the rage of their white neighbors opposed to their moving in next to them.

Both Carl and his wife, Nannie Louise Hansberry, were active members of the Chicago chapters of the NAACP and Urban League (as well as the Republican Party, which was still known as the "party of Abraham Lincoln"). Carl challenged the racist notion of restrictive covenants in a long legal battle that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court (*Hansberry v. Lee*, 311 U.S. 32, 1940). The court found that Hansberry could sue over the covenant, but did not rule on the unconstitutionality of restrictive residential covenants in general. Carl later ran for U.S. Congress and lost.

In his final years, he grew increasingly frustrated over the raw racism in our nation. He hoped to move his family to Mexico but died prematurely in 1946 at age 51 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Lorraine Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930, and grew up in an intellectual milieu where she had frequent contact with W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson and other notable African American activist leaders.

One of her first jobs, after attending the University of Wisconsin and the New School in New York City, was working on Freedom, a black newspaper founded by Paul Robeson and Louis Burnham. She played many roles there: subscription clerk, receptionist, typist, editorial assistant, reporter and editorial writer.

She was active in the civil rights movement, as well as in campaigns for black Africans living under the yoke of colonialist rule, and the rights of Islamic women of Egypt. In 1952, she attended a peace conference in Montevideo, Uruguay, representing Robeson, whose passport had been revoked because of his communist sympathies.

She was also active in the nascent gay rights movement at a time when homosexuality was illegal in New York City. Recent **biographical studies** report Hansberry was a lesbian and closeted.

In 1953, Hansberry married Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish publisher, songwriter and activist. They lived in Greenwich Village. They divorced in 1962 but remained close friends and he became her literary executor until his death in 1991.

Hansberry wrote "Raisin in the Sun" between her 26th and 27th birthdays. When it was produced two years later, it was an immediate hit and, in 1961, a Golden Globe-nominated motion picture starring Sidney Poitier. In 1973, the play was transformed into a musical, "Raisin," which won the 1974 Tony for best musical. More recently, the play was performed on Broadway in 2004 and on television in 2008, starring Sean Combs, Audra McDonald and Phylicia Rashad.

While her most famous work had lived on in the 60 years since its debut, Hansberry died at the age of 34 of pancreatic cancer, currently the fourth-leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S.

According to the American Cancer Society, this year alone more than 56,000 people (nearly 30,000 men and 26,000 women) will be diagnosed with the disease. Roughly 45,000 people (nearly 24,000 men and more than 21,000 women) will die of the disease this year. The average lifetime risk of pancreatic cancer is one in 64, but there are risk factors that can increase those odds such as inherited genes, including BRCA2 and p16, the cause of Lynch syndrome;. Other risk factors include diabetes mellitus, family history of pancreatic cancer, pancreatitis, smoking, obesity and being over the age of 65.

Symptoms, which typically appear after the tumor has grown and spread, include pain in the upper abdomen that radiates to the back; loss of appetite or unintended weight loss; depression; new-onset diabetes; blood clots; fatigue; yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes (jaundice), which indicates liver involvement.

The diagnosis is most often made with imaging techniques, such as a CAT or MRI scans, but medical scientists are working on a series of blood and genetic tests to detect the disease before it has a chance to spread and kill.

Treatments include radiation, chemotherapy, and immune therapies, but the earlier the disease is caught, the better the chances one has of survival.

Hansberry was 32 when first stricken with pancreatic cancer and she was in and out of hospitals for the remainder of her life. She died at age 34 on Jan. 12, 1965.

Her funeral was held at the Church of the Master in Harlem where she was eulogized by Robeson and the SNCC organizer James Forman; Langston Hughes read a poem; Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin, a close friend, sent along written tributes.

After her death, Nemiroff created a play called "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," based on Hansberry's writings, and was later published as autobiographical collection.

The phrase comes from a speech Hansberry made to winners of a writing contest in 1964: "Though it is a thrilling and marvelous thing to be merely young and gifted in such times, it is doubly so, doubly dynamic — to be young, gifted and black."

When we celebrate Hansberry today, we can remember those who have fallen to pancreatic cancer, and cheer on those who have survived this terrible disease. Perhaps we ought to all listen to the 1969 civil rights song Nina Simone wrote in Lorraine's honor:

*When you feel really low  
Yeah, there's a great truth you should know  
When you're young, gifted and black  
Your soul's intact*

*By* – **Dr. Howard Markel**

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