

City of Philadelphia



Council of the City of Philadelphia
Office of the Chief Clerk
Room 402, City Hall
Philadelphia

(Resolution No. 230122)

RESOLUTION

Honoring and recognizing Mama Maisha, a creative and loving teacher, community leader, and cultural educator, who has nurtured social justice movements in Philadelphia, built and transformed institutions, and shared her wisdom with so many Philadelphians.

WHEREAS, Maisha Sullivan-Ongoza, or Mama Maisha, as she is known to so many, was raised in a South Philadelphia home that was a supportive haven in the community, where there was always a strong batch of coffee, a big Sunday meal of fish and grits, and an open invitation for all those who wanted to come by; and

WHEREAS, brought up by her twice-widowed father and after her mother and step-mother passed away, by community mothers, Mama Maisha has spent her life enriching, building, and fighting for the community that helped raise her and for countless others in Philadelphia and across the world; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha entered her teens and adulthood in the 1960s, becoming active and conscious during the Black Power era of the Black Freedom Movement; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha considers herself a survivor of the era, as she was surveilled by the FBI and suffered at the hands of police brutality—when she attended social justice demonstrations while pregnant, officers threatened to kick the baby out of her, and at times her husband was beaten so badly he could hardly walk; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha became enmeshed in the movement, attending and organizing marches, conferences, and protests, including the first demonstration for Black Studies in the Philadelphia School District, where the police brutally beat many of the 2,000 students protesting; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha met her husband, ancestor social activist, Kauli Ongoza, at an organizing meeting for the Urban Survival Training Institute, a cultural nationalist organization, and together they raised three biological children and three social children: Upaji Sullivan,

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Kiongoza Sullivan and Milele Sullivan, Bridgett Kinsey-Sumpter, Donald Kinsey and Lisa Kinsey; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha first sought to pursue a career in medicine, but after administrators threatened to revoke her scholarship for assisting the Black Panther Health Clinic, she decided to pursue education instead; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha graduated from the Community College Philadelphia, Temple University, and the University of Pennsylvania with degrees in social work and education; unwilling to accept the racist education children were receiving, she was instrumental in starting and supporting Black Independent Schools in Philadelphia; her later work eventually led to partnering with others to lead over 20 summer Freedom School programs in Philadelphia, providing essential education to thousands of Philadelphians; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha was a caring and loving teacher, she sought to foster and build a strong community in and outside of the classroom, and taught her students to do the same; she made frequent home visits and connected students and parents with the resources and services they needed, often with the guidance of Point Breeze legend and mentor Mamie Nichols; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha became the first paid Director of Temple University's Pan-African Studies Community Education Program (PASCEP), where she administered a program that helped community members receive their GED, taught adults how to read, provided cultural education, emphasized community engagement, and much more; and

WHEREAS, at PASCEP, her African-centered approach focused on the life skills people needed most—teaching janitors how to read the warning labels on chemicals that were burning them or teaching mothers to read child welfare policies—and meeting folks where they were, such as bringing these program into prisons; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha brought her communal-centered approach to Philadelphia's family support system, while working at the Children's Aid Society she started the Maderia Family Center, the first community based family center, while partnering with the Church of the Advocate in North Philadelphia, with a satellite program at the Philadelphia Health District, so that families could receive services which included donated food, parenting education, and enrichment activities; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha's successful Maderia Family Center program received national attention and recognition, leading her to work nationally with the Family Resource Coalition, a multicultural policy and programming organization based in Chicago; her work was published in national family support magazines and training manuals; Mama Maisha trained, presented, and taught about family support and community building across the country; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha brought her African-centered philosophy to social work; after years of running social service agencies—often with the help of Mamie Nichols—in the

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neighborhoods of Philadelphia that were underserved from the city's services structures, Mama Maisha received a scholarship for a Masters in Social Work from the University of Pennsylvania; and

WHEREAS, Always seeking to improve the institutions she encountered, Mama Maisha encouraged the University of Pennsylvania to let her integrate her Masters in Social Work with a Masters in Education, a dual degree tradition that continues to this day; and

WHEREAS, much of what was taught about social work involved an idea of preventing "enmeshment" with an emphasis on keeping significant space between social worker and client; Mama Maisha rejected this approach, seeking greater involvement in the lives of her clients, building community and trust; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha was asked to lead the University of Pennsylvania's Philadelphia chapter of Say Yes to Education, Bryant Chapter, a program devoted to increasing high school and postsecondary graduation rates for low resourced students and families; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha transformed the Philadelphia Say Yes to Education, Bryant Chapter program; under her leadership, families took a central role—scholarships were given to awardees' parents and siblings, parents were invited to monthly meetings, retreats, and other family strengthening activities, parents were taught recent techniques like New Math, so that they could help their children with homework, and the program became involved in the students' lives starting in kindergarten; and

WHEREAS, Under Mama Maisha's creative and community-based approach, the Say Yes to Education, Bryant Chapter was an incredible success—the awardees' who remained in the program had 100% high school graduation rate and the postsecondary rate is still rising; many of the program participants remain like family to Mama Maisha; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha continues to serve the well-being of those in need; she is a founding member and Coordinator of the Pan-African Sisterhood Health Initiative (PASHI), a weekly volunteer group that brings women and men of all ages together to make personal hygiene items and birthing kits for schools and organizations in Africa and the Caribbean; PASHI also works with local middle school students, teaching them one-on-one sewing and other life skills, ensuring that all young people leave with something of value; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha has long been a leading educator and supporter of Kwanzaa, regarding the celebration as an important aspect of organizing, learning, community-building, and re-Africanization for over 50 years; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha is the local Chairperson of the Philadelphia Chapter of the National Association of Kawaiida Organizations (NAKO) and a founding member and Chair of the Kwanzaa Cooperative, which serves Greater Philadelphia, New Jersey, Delaware, and New York; Mama Maisha teaches thousands about the importance of the Nguzo Saba, the Seven

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Principles and practices of Kwanzaa; she has been instrumental in the lighting program at Boathouse Row, has lit the Kinara at City hall and has been commissioned by New York City to create their first ever municipal Kwanzaa Kinara, a candle holder; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha continues to find creative and impactful ways to serve and educate; for example, she since the 1990s, she has coordinated and hosted quarterly “Make it and Take it” workshops which are community-based, affordable, skill sharing opportunities; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha hosted a popular radio program, Fertile Ground, a talk show focusing on African American and African diaspora culture, history, communities and struggles; and is a frequent guest on talk shows and social media broadcasts; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha is a talented multimedia artist, learning from and encouraged by her father who would take her to his contracting jobs; she creates beautiful African-inspired woodwork, jewelry, clothing, and dolls; and she is a founding member of NGOMA Tribute to the Drum, an annual outdoor free event which provides Philadelphians a chance to honor their ancestors and honor local creative people who keep African musical contributions alive; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha’s experience and talent as a founding member of the Sankofa Artisans Guild (SAG), with a focus on art and history, made her the ideal member of the curating team and a contributing artist for the Nana Harriet Tubman Exhibit, which was exhibited on three floors of City Hall in 2022 and featured work by 30 artists, inspired by the heroic life and contributions of Nana Harriet Tubman; and

WHEREAS, Mama Maisha’s steadfast work for those facing injustice has taken many forms through the decades, but her creative, African-centered, community-based approach — grounded in love and a commitment to bringing others along with her — has never wavered; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Honors and recognizes Mama Maisha, a creative and loving teacher, community leader, and cultural educator, who has nurtured justice movements in Philadelphia, built and transformed institutions, and shared her wisdom with so many Philadelphians.

FURTHER RESOLVED, That an engrossed copy of this resolution be presented to Mama Maisha, as an expression of the admiration and respect of this legislative body.

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CERTIFICATION: This is a true and correct copy of the original Resolution, Adopted by the Council of the City of Philadelphia on the sixteenth day of February, 2023.

Darrell L. Clarke
PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Michael A. Decker
CHIEF CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Introduced by: Councilmember Brooks

Sponsored by: Councilmembers Brooks, Johnson, Lozada, Squilla, Driscoll,
Bass, Vaughn, Thomas and Phillips