

EDITORIAL: Educator Rita Pierson's death invites us to emulate her gusto, optimism in battling poverty

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By virtue of her dynamic, utterly engaging personality and upbeat, tough-love approach to improving the chances of children in the classroom and life, Friday's death of anti-poverty crusader Rita Pierson can't help but leave many of us feeling floored. Perhaps more than any other individual, this nationally known education consultant helped galvanize a local anti-poverty movement that had been painfully slow to form. Once she got involved, there seemed no stopping it.

Three months ago the Waco Independent School District announced Pierson was to be chief administrative officer of community and family outreach. But her deeper purpose was to work with classroom teachers, city officials, church leaders, businesses and university experts in crafting an aggressive approach to battling poverty, which the Greater Waco Community Education Alliance helped identify as not only a glaring societal problem in Waco but an impediment to preparing youngsters for academic success and rewarding careers.

As former Trib colleague Sandra Sanchez remarked upon trying to keep up with Pierson around town one day in February: "She's unabashed, unapologetic and brutally honest. This outspoken African-American professional isn't afraid to tell polite Anglo leaders what low-income African-American and Hispanic families expect and need. And she promises she will also tell the poor what they need to do to better themselves."

That included holding the poor accountable and teaching employers how to mentor workers to help them succeed. The Bridges Out of Poverty workshops she led coached employers in how to talk and relate to low-paid workers on their terms and understand their limitations, such as a possible lack of transportation. And how to spell out what they in turn expect of workers: not deserting jobs on holidays or after tax refunds.

Pierson had the bravado, smarts and optimism to tackle not only the curse of poverty but problems of race that still bedevil how we view one another. It's hard to imagine continuing without her, but we can begin by tapping some of her energy and remembering the useful examples and stirring words she offered to help drive this initiative.