

Woman was secretary to civil rights leader

■ The Arlington woman, who once worked with Martin Luther King Jr., loved to cover the news and help the needy in Tarrant County.

By **GORDON DICKSON**
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

When Barbra Pace Sears spoke about her time as Martin Luther King Jr.'s secretary, friends and colleagues gathered around to soak up the history.

"She knew all the principals involved in the civil rights movement," said Chuck Flores, who worked with Mrs. Sears at *La Vida News*, an African-American newspaper serving Tarrant County. "It was amazing to hear her talk about it."

Mrs. Sears, who graduated from high school at age 15, helped desegregate Georgia col-



SEARS

leges and eventually became an urban planner and community affairs manager for Fort Worth. She died Saturday at age 71.

Despite her front-row seat at the civil rights movement, Mrs. Sears didn't brag, friends said.

Alice Bernstein, a New York journalist whose work has appeared in *La Vida News*, said she had known Mrs. Sears for several years but only recently learned about her past.

"I could kick myself for not asking more questions," said Bernstein, who in November began interviewing Mrs. Sears as part of a fellowship on ending racism. "Every scrap of information I have on her, I'm now going to assemble."

In her later years, the long-time Arlington resident volunteered for several nonprofit agencies, including the Area Agency on Aging.

She also wrote and edited many articles for *La Vida News*, where she had been managing editor since 1994.

"She wrote a lot, she read a lot and she helped a lot of people," husband Willie D. Sears Jr., a Fort Worth native, said Wednesday. "She was the smartest person I ever met. She was a different breed of person, a historian and an outstanding person."

She was born in Beaver Falls, Pa., the oldest of four children.

She was a gifted student, so her parents sent her to Atlanta, where at age 15 she became the youngest freshman at Clark College.

Between semesters, she returned home to help raise her siblings — and teach them academic discipline.

In Georgia, she joined King in marching to desegregate Georgia State University. She worked as a secretary at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which King and other civil rights leaders founded to push for nonviolent desegregation.

She worked despite death

Memorial service

■ 10 a.m. today, Polytechnic United Methodist Church, Collard Street near East Rosedale Street in Fort Worth.

■ For information, call Guardian Funeral Home at (817) 293-8477.

threats, relatives said.

"We have letters of apology from the state of Georgia to my mom for the way she was treated during that time," said daughter Crystal Freeman, who lives in Marietta, Ga.

Mrs. Sears married a minister and moved to Texas. Over many years, she earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas at Dallas and master's degrees from the University of Texas at Arlington and North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas) in Denton.

After her first marriage ended in divorce, she met Willie Sears in the early 1980s.