



## **Robert L. Clay, Sr.**

The Baltimore/Washington minority business community was shocked on May 16, 2005, to awake to the news that one of its most successful members and most fervent activists, Robert Clay, had been found dead in his office. Robert Clay's life ended the way he lived it, in a sea of controversy shrouded with a touch of the mysterious. Although both the Baltimore City Police Department and the FBI have ruled his death as a suicide, his family and friends still believe he was killed—by who they couldn't say. A man who has bucked the system as hard as Clay did tends to make some enemies along the way.

Clay's greatest accomplishments were as founder of the Maryland Minority Contractors Association and the Maryland Metropolitan Minority Contractors Association. Clay was instrumental in the minority business movement in Baltimore and subsequently the State of Maryland. He sacrificed a tremendous amount of his time and resources in order to make it better for all minority business owners. Because of Clay's effort, the State of Maryland became a leader in introducing minority business set asides at the state and local government level passing legislation that created Maryland's program. Clay, working with the late Congressman Parren Mitchell, was also a major contributor in the development of the federal government's program as well. Clay's fierce defense was legendary particularly in his continual efforts to level the playing field and acquiring a fair share of business for minority owned companies.

### ***Patricia Sullivan's article in the Washington Post summarizes his life (exert):***

Clay, a resident of Laurel Maryland and son of a backhoe operator, built a company that won excavation contracts for parts of the Baltimore subway system and the Fort McHenry Tunnel, which carries Interstate 95 under Baltimore Harbor.

He ran for state Senate in 1994, spending \$100,000 of his own money. It was a nasty race, with opponents trading near-slandorous charges about personal behavior. After coming in fourth, Clay sued to have the election overturned, but that suit also was unsuccessful.

His firm, Robert Clay Inc., reaped millions in government contracts set aside for minority-owned businesses, and Clay immersed himself in local and state politics, bankrolling a generation of Democratic candidates, according to a 1999 profile in the Baltimore Sun. But his opposition could be as fierce as his loyalty. Just prior to his death, he caused a stir at Baltimore City Hall after he distributed a flier attacking the leadership of Mayor Martin O'Malley, particularly on minority business policies.

In 1999, he claimed to have intercepted racist leaflets, purportedly from a previously and subsequently unknown white supremacist group, that backed O'Malley's mayoral candidacy; he made thousands of copies and distributed them on Baltimore streets.

Mr. Clay sued and was sued numerous times over the years regarding contracts lost, bills unpaid and businesses that went bust.

He was appointed in 2003 to the Maryland Commission on Minority Enterprise Reform. Mr. Clay was born in Wilson, N.C., and graduated from a contract education program at Anne Arundel Community College in 1984. He was a member of First Baptist Church of Savage-Guilford and a lifetime member of the NAACP.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/24/AR2005052401695\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/24/AR2005052401695_pf.html)