

# Herbert Blyden, 61, Speaker For Inmates in Attica Revolt

By **ROBERT McG. THOMAS Jr.**

Herbert X. Blyden, the jail-hardened, prison-educated civil rights activist who gave eloquent voice to 1,200 beleaguered inmates as their chief negotiator during the 1971 Attica prison uprising, died on Sunday at a hospice in Buffalo. He was 61.

His wife, Elaine, said the cause was prostate cancer.

During a life in which he did time for four separate felony convictions, became an impassioned advocate for prison reform, campaigned for feminism and equal rights for gay people and seconded Ramsey Clark's nomination for the United States Senate nomination at the 1974 New York State Democratic convention, Mr. Blyden displayed his share of contradictions.

He was, among other things, an intimidating, bull-shouldered, 220-pound six-footer who read Schopenhauer, Santayana and Hermann Hesse, not to mention all the works of B. F. Skinner and enough legal texts to make him a recognized jailhouse lawyer long before Attica helped make him a legend.

He was also often belligerent, but then, as he saw it, he had a lot to be belligerent about.

By his own account, Mr. Blyden was a trouble-maker from the beginning. A native of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, who was brought up by an aunt along with 13 of his cousins, he was sent to a home for incorrigible boys as a youngster and later served time in a series of mainland Federal prisons after forging a series of postal money orders at the age of 16.

Incarcerated at a Federal prison in Tallahassee, Fla., he experienced such racism from white prisoners and guards that he organized black inmates, touching off a small riot that led to his transfer to a lockup in Lewisburg, Pa., a comparatively benign prison where he began the study that eventually led to a junior college degree.

Released from Federal custody, he came to New York City, where he got a job at a service station operated by his father. But after an argument, he took \$150 from the till and his father had him arrested. After his court-appointed lawyer advised him to plead guilty, assuring him of a suspended sentence, he was sentenced to five years in state prison.



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Herbert X. Blyden

Mr. Blyden never claimed he had not forged the money orders or taken the money from his father's gas station, but he steadfastly maintained his innocence when he was convicted of armed robbery in 1965 on the testimony of a single witness, who identified Mr. Blyden as the "colored man" he had glimpsed driving a getaway car. Mr. Blyden received a sentence of 10 to 15 years.

Mr. Blyden was at work in an Attica metal shop on the day in September 1971 that a chain of events led to the prison takeover by rampaging inmates. But it was not surprising that he was selected the inmates' chief negotiator.

A year earlier, while being held at the Manhattan House of Detention,

known as the Tombs, Mr. Blyden was selected by his fellow inmates to negotiate the settlement of what became a three-day takeover of the jail.

That uprising ended peacefully, but the Attica rebellion ended in bloodshed after Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller ordered an all-out assault that killed 29 prisoners and 10 hostages — guards whom Mr. Blyden and other Muslim inmates had been protecting from more vicious elements of the prison population during the five-day siege.

In the notorious aftermath of the assault in which inmates were tortured and left for hours without medical attention, Mr. Blyden escaped major injuries. But he joined the Federal lawsuit in Buffalo that eventually found a deputy warden liable for the atrocities and left the state open to millions of dollars in potential damages.

Mr. Blyden, who later won dismissal of charges stemming from both the Attica and Tombs takeovers, was released in 1973 and became a sought-after speaker at political and civil rights rallies.

Although he had drafted much of the Attica Manifesto, which cited myriad specific abuses and sought a variety of specific remedies, Mr. Blyden saw even the most egregious examples of brutalization by guards and prison officials as mere symptoms of a much wider and more virulent social disease, one in which poor, black or other despised defendants were routinely denied the safeguards of a judicial system that promised justice for all but that all too often delivered it only to those able to afford expensive lawyers.

At the end of his life, Mr. Blyden was true to form. During his eight-month stay at the hospice, the man who organized Federal prisoners as a teen-ager was elected to the patient council.

In addition to his wife, from whom he had been separated for several years, Mr. Blyden is survived by a son from a previous marriage, Herbert Jr.; another son, Malik, and two grandsons.