

Renowned Poet, Activist Nikki Giovanni Dead at 81

Giovanni, a civil rights icon and award-winning author, died of complications from lung cancer.

December 17, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

Revolutionary poet, activist and professor Yolande Cornelia “Nikki” Giovanni died December 9 of complications from [lung cancer](#), her wife told [The New York Times](#). She was 81 years old.

“The acclaimed poet, Black Arts Movement icon whose poems of wit, wonder, and wisdom were celebrated in children’s books, on keynote stages and television shows, and in more than two dozen bestselling poetry collections, died peacefully on December 9, 2024, with her life-long partner, Virginia [Ginney] Fowler, by her side,” friend and author Renee Watson said in a [statement to CNN](#).



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A prolific poet who gained attention in the late 1960s, Giovanni was active in the civil rights movement. Throughout her life, she won dozens of awards, including the Langston Hughes Medal, the Maya Angelou Lifetime Achievement Award and 31 honorary doctorates. She was also named as one of Oprah Winfrey's 25 "Living Legends."

The Tennessee-born author published over 30 books and taught at Rutgers and Queens College. In 1987, she joined the Department of English at Virginia Tech, retiring in 2022.

"To know Nikki was to be forever changed by her," said Laura Belmonte, PhD, the dean of Virginia Tech's College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, [in a news release](#). "One minute, she would say something that would make you laugh so hard you would cry. The next minute, she would say something that would haunt you for months and make you reevaluate the world as you knew it. She was a force of nature and our college, Virginia Tech, and the world itself are better for her impact on all of them."

This year, an estimated 234,580 people will be diagnosed with lung cancer and more than 125,800 people will die of the disease, according to the [American Cancer Society](#) (ACS). It is by far the leading cause of cancer death in the United States for both men and women, accounting for about one in five of all cancer deaths.

Black men are about 12% more likely to develop lung cancer during their lifetime compared with white men. For Black women, the rate is about 16% lower compared with white women, according to the ACS.

Additionally, Black men and women have lower lung cancer survival rates compared with white people. This is due in part to the fact that Black people are significantly less likely to be diagnosed early, before the cancer has spread elsewhere, according to the [American Lung Association](#).

Giovanni's *Blues: For All the Changes: New Poems*, published in 1999, includes poems about nature and her battle with cancer. Recently, she had been working on a memoir titled *A Street Called Mulvaney*, as well as a poetry collection, *The Last Book*, which were set to be published in 2025.

"My dream was not to publish or to even be a writer: my dream was to discover something no one else had thought of. I guess that's why I'm a poet. We put things together in ways no one else does," Giovanni wrote in a [biography on her website](#).

