

Dr. Dorothy Height—Extraordinary leader, lantern, and role model

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Wednesday, 21 April 2010 14:03



“We African American Women seldom do just what we want to do, but always what we have to do. I am grateful to have been in a time and place where I could be a part of what was needed.”

This is the quote inscribed on Dr. Dorothy Height’s Congressional Gold Medal, just one of the many dozens of awards Dr. Height received over her extraordinary life, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The brilliant Dr. Height was a lantern and role model for millions of women and a long haul social change agent blessed with uncommon commitment and talent. Her fingerprints are quietly embedded in many of the transforming events of the last seven decades as Blacks, women, and children pushed open and walked through previously closed doors of opportunity. To me she was a dearest friend, mentor, and role model, and the Children’s Defense Fund was blessed to have her serve on our board for over 30 years. When she passed away on April 20 at age 98, we all lost a treasure, a wise counselor, and a rock we could always lean against for support in tough times.

Even as a young girl her speaking skills stood out. She attended New York University in part with a \$1,000 scholarship from a national oratorical contest sponsored by the Elks (after being turned away by Barnard, which had already reached its quota of two Negro students for the year). On November 7, 1937, which Dr. Height remembers as the day that changed her life, she was the 25-year-old assistant director of the Harlem YWCA and had been chosen to escort First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to a National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) meeting, and there she met NCNW’s founder and president, the legendary Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune. Mrs. Bethune was immediately impressed with Dr. Height. She became Dr. Height’s close friend and mentor, and in 1957, two years after Mrs. Bethune’s death, Dr. Height became NCNW’s president—a position she held until 1998, when she became Chair and President Emerita.

During the Civil Rights Movement, while so many women were playing vital roles that weren’t featured in the spotlight, Dr. Height was always up front with a seat at the table. She was often the only woman in the room with Dr. King and the rest of the “Big Six” group of male leaders as they planned many of the Civil Rights Movement’s key strategies, and she was sitting on the

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stage—she should have been a speaker—at the historic March on Washington. She led the NCNW membership as active participants in the movement and reminded us that women were its backbone—unseen but strong. One of the cornerstones of NCNW’s civil rights strategies was Wednesdays in Mississippi, which brought together White and Black northern women to travel to Mississippi to develop relationships with Black and White southern women, educate themselves and each other, and create bridges of understanding between the North and South and across racial and class lines.

Later, NCNW developed a range of model national programs focused on Black women’s and families’ needs including employment, child care, housing, hunger, health care, and youth development. Dr. Height began the NCNW’s wonderful Black Family Reunion Celebrations twenty-five years ago, emphasizing the traditional values and strengths of Black families at a time when too many people focused on the Black family’s “breakdown.” Dr. Height always understood how African Americans’ needs connect to a larger global mission as well. She participated in conferences and leadership training sessions and on official delegations around the world, and from the White House to the United Nations, her expertise on civil rights, women’s rights, and human rights was always in demand. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia’s and Africa’s first woman president, is just one of the many people who has said she owes a debt to Dr. Height’s leadership.

Through it all, Dr. Height’s intellect and strength remained as sharp as her signature sense of style. A musical based on her life was named “If This Hat Could Talk,” and anyone who knew Dr. Height and her trademark gorgeous hats understands just how that title was chosen. When Dr. Height was awarded her Congressional Gold Medal, then-Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton began her tribute by saying she had known Dr. Height for more than thirty years, since they first began working together on the Children’s Defense Fund’s board—and “just as in those long ago days, today once again, Dr Height is the best dressed woman in the entire room.”

I personally and CDF were always profoundly inspired by and grateful for her extraordinary example of leadership and service. In 1990, Dr. Height co-convoked with Dr. John Hope Franklin and the Children’s Defense Fund a quiet but landmark meeting of 22 Black leaders in 1990 at the beautiful Rockefeller Foundation conference center in Bellagio, Italy that launched the Black Community Crusade for Children (BCCC) committed to Leave No Child Behind™. We committed to weave and reweave the rich fabric of family and community that historically have been the cornerstones of the healthy development of Black children; to tap into and strengthen the strong Black community tradition of self-help; to rebuild the bridges between the Black middle class and poor; to assist and galvanize current Black leadership around specific goals for children; and to identify, train, nurture, link and empower a new generation of effective Black servant-leaders under the age of 30. Since that 1990 meeting, over 10,000 Black college-age and high school youths have been trained at CDF-Haley Farm near Knoxville, Tennessee; community service models like the summer CDF Freedom Schools® program, a reading enrichment and child empowerment program which has served over 80,000 children between the ages of 5-15, have been established at sites across the country; and CDF-Haley Farm has become the center for spiritual renewal and leadership development and the incubator of new community models like the Harlem Children’s Zone for the 21st century children’s movement. The Bethune-Height house at Haley Farm is named in Dr. Height’s honor.

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We all needed Dr. Height's example of steadfastly doing what she had to do. Now we must do what we have to do to save all of our children.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org