



Perspectives

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On Women & Politics

Lydia Quarles, J.D., Senior Policy Analyst
John C. Stennis Institute of Government

“If times aren’t ripe, you have to ripen the times...” -- Dorothy I. Height

Last month one of the most influential women in America died, yet very few people even recognize her name: Dr. Dorothy L. Height. Perhaps the reason that people do not recognize the name has to do with her philosophy of life and work.

The Washington Post called Dr. Height “arguably the most influential woman at the top levels of civil rights leadership, but she never drew the major media attention that conferred celebrity and instant recognition on some of the other civil rights leaders of her time.” Her philosophy of life and work, which she often shared with co-workers, might explain it: *“stop worrying about whose name gets in the paper and start doing.... We must try to take our task more seriously and ourselves more lightly.”* Dr. Height leaves a legacy of constancy in her devotion to civil rights and women’s rights. She never shirked a duty or an opportunity to encourage or influence in these two passions of her life.

Dr. Height was born in 1912 in Richmond, Virginia, but principally raised in Rankin, Pennsylvania, outside of Pittsburg, where she moved with her parents at the age of four. She graduated from its public school system as valedictorian of her class. She applied at the college of her choice, Barnard College, and met all academic requirements for admission but received a rejection letter anyway. It seems that Barnard had already admitted its “quota” of African American students. The college would consider her admission at some later time.

Not feeling that she had time to spare, she entered NYU, obtaining her bachelors and masters degrees in educational psychology within 4 years. In addition to these earned degrees and additional hours of post graduate work, she was the recipient of thirty-six Honorary Doctorate Degrees from such distinguished educational institutions as Harvard, Columbia and her alma mater, NYU. In 1980, Barnard College awarded Dr. Height its highest honor, the Barnard College Medal of Distinction. This recognition was just one of the prestigious honors conferred upon her during her life, but it must have been particularly sweet.

No fewer than four United States Presidents have honored Dr. Height. From President Roosevelt, she received the Freedom Award. From President Ronald Reagan she received the Freedom Medal. From President Clinton, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. President George W. Bush presented her with the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest and most distinguished award presented by the United States Congress to a civilian.

Dr. Height may be best remembered as the Chair and President Emerita of the National Council of Negro Women but it is her actual work as a young women with the administrations of FDR and Eisenhower that set her on the road to her remarkable future. Lobbying Eleanor Roosevelt in the early '30s on issues of civil rights and women's rights, she was the first person that President Roosevelt turned to during the Harlem riot of 1935, asking her to help him "deal with the outcome." During the 1950's, having previously established herself as a social worker and reasoned voice on her passions – civil rights and women's rights – she consulted with President Eisenhower on issues associated with public school desegregation.

By 1960, as a bona fide civil rights activist, Dr. Height was the only woman on the United Civil Rights Leadership Team, composed of Dr. Martin Luther King, Whitney H. Young, A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, Roy Wilkins and Representative John Lewis. She was present "at every effort for social progressive change" said Representative Lewis on the occasion of her retirement as president of the National Council of Negro Women. And yet she was often unnoticed.

Several of Dr. Height's unsung contributions occurred in Mississippi. In 1964, after passage of the Civil Rights Act, she organized and actively participated in the "Women in Mississippi" project, consisting of weekly trips to Mississippi by interracial groups of women to assist at Freedom Schools and voter registration. She also fostered a relationship between the National Council of Negro Women and the Department of Housing and Urban Renewal to bring a Turnkey III Home Ownership project to Gulfport. Later in the '70s, she helped to organize a development project for rural Mississippians known as the "pig bank" -- giving pigs to poor, hungry families and asking them to raise them and commit two pigs from subsequent litters to another family -- clearly a precursor to Heifer International and other projects which modeled themselves after the "pig bank".

Dr. Height worked just as hard to overcome gender bias as she worked to overcome racial bias. She was present when President Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act in 1963 and when President Clinton celebrated the 35th anniversary of that legislation. As president of the National Council of Negro Women, she worked tirelessly on issues of childcare, housing and career counseling for women. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, currently representing the District of Columbia in Congress, noted that Dr. Height was the first African American women in the nation to realize "that you had to be feminist at the same time you were African."

Always a voice of reason and reconciliation, she decried the militant position of "black power". Her response: "We do not want black power for American negroes. We don't want white power for American whites...The kind of power we seek is the power of freedom in a colorless society – the power to help build a constructive nation and a constructive world together with our fellow Americans." She would have said the same of the gender divide: we seek the power of freedom in a genderless society.

Dorothy I. Height published her memoirs in 2003, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*.



If you would be interested in attending a seminar on "Applied Politics for Women", please contact me at lydia@sig.msstate.edu.

The John C. Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University