



Tireless Civil Rights Campaigner Continues to Work for Social Justice

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At 93, Dorothy Height has been an eyewitness to more civil rights history than any other black leader living today. Ms. Height says she felt it was her mission to help people from the time she was a child in Rankin, Pennsylvania. An avid learner and gifted student, Ms. Height entered a national oratory contest for a four-year scholarship to Barnard College in New York City. Speaking on the subject of the U.S. Constitution, she won the contest and packed her bags for New York. But she says her arrival at the school was the first of many instances where she would experience the sting of overt racism. "I was accepted at Barnard College and was denied admission when I arrived because they had a quota of two (Negroes). And they did not know that I was not white. And so when I got there I was turned away." She adds, vehemently, "Nobody can tell me that affirmative action is quotas - I know what a quota is."

Before the day was done, Ms. Height applied to and was accepted to New York University, where she would earn her bachelor and masters degrees in four years. Fueled by her commitment to social change, Dorothy Height worked alongside Mary McCloud Bethune, founder of the National Council of Negro Women (from whom she would ultimately inherit the top position) and served as advisor on women's issues to first lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

She met Dr. Martin Luther King when he was a 15 year-old student still undecided about his career. Ten years later, says Ms. Height, 'he became my leader.'

She worked beside Dr. King throughout the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. She says while King's assassination in 1968 was devastating, it was also a mobilizing event in the black community. "I think that all of us realized that he was in the middle of something that we were part of. And we couldn't stop there. Because the dreamer was killed, we did not want to lose the dream."

Dorothy Height cites the

ending of segregation laws in the United States as the greatest change she has witnessed in her years as a civil rights advocate. But she says there is still a long way to go. "I think the biggest challenge now is that those who went to jail singing 'We Shall Overcome' now need to find that they have economic opportunity. That's what they need. The laws may change but they need to have the economic position to take advantage of them."

Dorothy Height says she is also concerned about the disproportionate number of young black men who find themselves in the U.S. correctional system. An estimated 12 percent of African-American men between the ages of 20 and 34 are in jail or prison, according to a recent Department of Justice report. She holds the family ultimately responsible, saying, "I think we have to do a better job. I cherish the fact that in my day, people did not hesitate to correct young people. Today some parents are afraid of their children because of the violence in our society. And I think that that's one of the things that is disturbing. It is true that we will pay \$200 or \$300 for sneakers (athletic shoes). And then children have no books."

Dorothy Height -- known as Dr. Height for the more than twenty honorary degrees she's received -- has also received the country's top honors for a lifetime of public service. These include the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1994 and, in 2004, the Congressional Gold Medal for her role as a leading advocate for racial and gender equality.

In 2003, Dr. Height published her memoir, **Open Wide the Freedom Gates** to critical acclaim. And 75 years after turning her away, Barnard College made Dorothy Height an honorary alumna, recognizing her qualifications and acknowledging their wrongful exclusion.

When asked if she has plans to retire, Dr. Height says she "may retire from a position," but she "will never retire from social justice."

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