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Civil Rights Legend Dorothy Height Passes

WASHINGTON (April 20) – Dorothy Irene Height, long-time civil rights activist, chair and president emerita of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) and "godmother of the women's movement," died of natural causes 3:41 a.m. Tuesday, April 20, at Howard University Hospital, 27 days after her 98th birthday.

"I am deeply saddened by the passing today of my dear friend and mentor, Dorothy Irene Height," former U.S. Secretary of Labor Alexis M. Herman said. "She was a dynamic woman with a resilient spirit, who was a role model for women and men of all faiths, races and perspectives. For her, it wasn't about the many years of her life, but what she did with them.

"Throughout her life, Dr. Height inspired countless women to become effective leaders. She advocated for families and encouraged children to value education and social justice. To draw on the words of NCNW founder Mary McLeod Bethune, Dr. Height leaves us love, hope, the challenge of developing confidence in one another, respect for the use of power, faith and racial dignity. She was a national treasure who lived life abundantly. She will be greatly missed, not only by those of us who knew her well, but by the countless beneficiaries of her enduring legacy."

For her years of service to the nation, which stretch back to her work with former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Height was awarded America's two highest civilian awards, the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1994 by President Bill Clinton and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2004 through an act of Congress.

Height's name is synonymous with the NCNW, an organization she headed from 1957, when she was elected the organization's fourth national president, to 1998, when she became the group's chair and president emerita.

She was a key figure throughout the Civil Rights Movement. She was the female team leader in the Civil Rights Leadership, along with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Whitney H. Young, A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, Roy Wilkins and John Lewis. At the 1963 March on Washington, Height was on the platform when King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech.

During the civil rights era, Height led NCNW to deal with unmet needs of women and their families by combating hunger and establishing decent housing and home ownership programs through the federal government for low-income families. Her organization led voter registration drives and established "Wednesdays in Mississippi" where interracial groups of women would help at Freedom Schools.

The organization's accomplishments under Height are numerous. NCNW developed model international, national and community-based programs that were replicated by many other groups, from teen-age parenting to pig "banks" that addressed hunger in rural areas. In 1975, she initiated the sole African-American private voluntary organization working in Africa, building on the success of NCNW's domestic projects.

NCNW established the Bethune Museum and Archives for Black Women, the first institution devoted to black women's history, and the Bethune Council House as a national historic site. The organization dedicated the statue of the first woman and person of color on public land, Mary McLeod Bethune, in the nation's Capitol. It also established the Black Family Reunion Celebration in 1986 to reinforce the historic strengths and traditional values of the African-American family.

Height was also a key figure in the YWCA beginning in 1937 as assistant executive director of the West 137th Street branch of the New York YWCA. From 1944 to 1977, she served on the staff of the National Board of the YWCA of the USA and held several leadership positions in public affairs and leadership training. Additionally, she served as director of the National YWCA School for Professional Workers. In 1965, she was named director of the Center for Racial Justice, a position she held until her retirement. In 1970, Height spearheaded the YWCA Convention's adoption of its "One Imperative" to the elimination of racism.

Born in Richmond, Va., and reared in Rankin, Pa., Height's career as a civil rights advocate began in 1933 when she became a leader of the United Christian Youth Movement of North America in the New Deal era.

She worked to prevent lynching, desegregate the armed forces, reform the criminal justice system and allow free access to public accommodations. She was also known for her extensive international and developmental education work.

She was one of 10 American youth delegates to the World Conference of Life and Work of the Churches in Oxford, England.

In 1938, Height was one of 10 American youth invited by Eleanor Roosevelt to spend a weekend at her Hyde Park, N.Y., home to plan and prepare for the World Youth Conference to be held at Vassar College.

In 1939, she was a representative of the YWCA to the World Conference of Christian Youth in Amsterdam Holland.

In 1947, Height became national president of Delta Sigma Theta after serving for three years as vice president.

In 1952, she served as a visiting professor at the University of Delhi, India in the Delhi School of Social Work.

Height also experienced her share of the kind of discrimination that she spent her life fighting. In her memoir, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, she described her traveling to New York's Barnard College at their request for an interview.

"Although I had been accepted, they could not admit me," she wrote. "It took me a while to realize that their decision was a racial matter: Barnard had a quota of two Negro students per year, and two others had already taken the spots."

She subsequently pursued studies at New York University, where she earned her Master's Degree in psychology.

At its 1980 commencement ceremonies years later, Barnard College awarded Height its highest honor, the Barnard Medal of Distinction. She has received 36 honorary doctorate degrees.

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