



REMEMBERING DOROTHY HEIGHT  
1912 - 2010

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Who's that lady? That was my first reaction when I saw historic black and white photos of victorious civil rights leaders. As a reporter I had covered some of their marches and demonstrations. I met Dr. King, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph and John Lewis. But there she was gracing some of the pictures, standing toe to toe and, in some cases, a head taller than some of the men. Always off to the side or in the background. I had to find out: who was this imposing woman—she of the benevolent smile wearing some of the biggest hats I had ever seen in my life?

I came to learn about Dorothy Height's accomplishments and later had the great pleasure of getting to know her personally, after she invited me to moderate some roundtable discussions on women and politics. She also wanted me to attend her announcement launching a series of Black Family Reunions across the nation. She believed the strength of our people was dependent on the strength of our families.

When Dorothy died on April 20, [2010], I mourned her loss with those relative few, who appreciated her tremendous contribution to our communities, in fact, to America. I say "few" because I doubt many black Americans could identify her or what she accomplished.

Could she really have been 98 years old? Yes she could, because her efforts to seek social justice and civil rights lasted 80 years. And during those eight decades she probably sported an eye-popping chapeau of every style and color possible. I always wanted to know if there was a room in her house where she stored, what must have been, her hundreds of hats. You just can't talk about the remarkable Ms. Height without mentioning her remarkable hats. They were her trademark.



Dorothy Height started her fight for social justice when she was just a teenager in Rankin, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. A smart and attractive young woman such as Dorothy could have been having a good time at 18 years of age, but she was volunteering for voting rights projects. After finishing her Bachelor's and Master's degrees at New York University, she began her career as a social worker and took up the plight of black women domestics who were hired for 15 cents an hour by white suburban housewives to cook, clean and care for their children.

Dorothy Height was most well known as the president of the National Council of Colored Women, a position she held from 1957 to 1997. She never stopped her struggle to seek justice, first for colored women and then for all her people. In the 1930's she was speaking out for equal pay to help women care for their families, and for anti-lynching laws to protect black men from being killed.

Obituaries and eulogies have variously described Dorothy Height as the queen of the civil rights movement, or the mother, or godmother. I doubt her male counterparts would have been as gracious back in the day. Even though she was involved every step of the way, Dorothy and other women working for civil rights, were quietly advised to take a back seat to the male leaders. As the story goes, black men should get the public attention, give the speeches and the media interviews. And to their credit, they also took the bloody blows to the head and were carted off to jail. This is not to say women didn't also suffer physical and criminal violence.

But the women acquiesced. The civil rights movement could not have made it without them. The women worked behind the scenes organizing marches and marching themselves. They found churches for rallies and places for marchers to sleep. They copied flyers and notified the media of upcoming events and incidents that occurred.

Dorothy Height was an award-winning orator with a booming contralto voice, but you didn't hear her speak at the March on Washington in 1963 even though she was one of the chief organizers. Only men gave



speeches. You would think a people victimized by being excluded could have included one woman in the spotlight on that momentous day.

However, in death, I believe Dorothy finally got her due. At Washington's National Cathedral, she was accorded the kind of funeral reserved for heads of state and the top echelon of American leaders. Presidents, the political establishment, civil rights and women leaders all praised her life of activism, and her indomitable spirit. President Obama openly shed tears during the service and eulogized her as a woman who cared more about the cause than who got the credit.

The United States has rightfully passed a law making Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday a national holiday. All of our children know about his life and death. I'm not calling for a holiday for Dorothy Height, just respect and historical attention. She should be included in all studies of the civil rights movement.

There are so many millions of young black girls, who need to know about a strong, brave and smart African American woman, who dedicated her life to making America a better place for them. She did it. And she always wore a pretty hat.

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