



Dr. Dorothy Height

Dorothy Height

'Open Wide the Freedom Gates'

by Patricia Merritt

Dorothy Irene Height lived her life serving those who had little to no hope and no voice. She wanted to “open wide the freedom gates” for other African Americans, women, and the poor as she matched her faith to real world problems. In so doing she achieved national recognition for her work, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1994 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2004.

Height was born March 24, 1912. Her father was a building contractor, and her mother a nurse. In 1916, the family moved to the coal-mining town of Rankin, Pennsylvania. Height's mother became active in the Pennsylvania Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and regularly took her daughter to meetings, providing Dorothy with the roots for a life of social activism. Her mother helped Height understand “my responsibility to other people, and she taught me the importance of being cooperative instead of competitive.”

Height's activism was also driven by her faith. The Heights lived next door to Emmanuel Baptist Church, where her father was the choirmaster, Sunday school superintendent, and a deacon; her mother was very active in missions work. “As a child,” she said, “I joined the church, and then I became active in all of the children's missions.”

She taught Bible stories to white children at a nearby Christian center for immigrants. She was hurt at the age of nine when her best friend (a white girl) told her she could no longer play with Height because she was black.

Height joined the Girl Reserve Club in Rankin, which was organized by the Pittsburgh Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and soon became club president. One day she wanted to swim at the YWCA pool in downtown Pittsburgh, only to learn that her race prohibited her from doing so. She later wrote, “I was only 12 years old. I had never heard of ‘social action,’ nor seen anyone engaged in it, but I barely took a breath before saying that I would like to see the executive director” about this discrimination. Early on, Height showed a talent for public speaking, and in a national oratorical contest won a \$1,000 college scholarship. However, Barnard College turned her down because the college had already filled its quota of two black students per year. Instead, she enrolled in New York University, where she earned a Bachelors and a Master's. She wanted to major in religion so she could work full time in the church, but one of her professors told her “the church was not ready for women, and the black church was surely not ready for me.”

So Height served God through social change. In 1933, she became a leader in the United Christian Youth Movement of

North America, which worked to end lynching, desegregate the armed services, reform the criminal justice system, and provide free access to public accommodations for all. Her first job was helping feed thousands of people out of work from the Depression at a Christian center in Brooklyn.

In 1937 Height started to work with the Harlem YWCA and in 1944 became part of the national staff. She introduced policy to integrate YWCA facilities nationwide and was elected the Interracial Education Secretary. In 1965, she became the first director of the YWCA's new Center for Racial Justice, where she monitored the Association's progress toward full integration.

The YWCA and her Christian youth work brought Height into contact with first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune, founder and president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). When Height escorted Mrs. Roosevelt to an NCNW meeting held at the YWCA, Bethune put her hand on Height and said, “The freedom gates are half ajar. We must pry them fully open.”

Thus began Height's lifelong affiliation with the NCNW. After Bethune's death in 1955, Height served as president for 41 years. She helped organize and coordinate the 1963 March on Washington. Height participated in virtually all the major civil and human rights efforts of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, many times as the only woman in critical, strategic meetings. She said she felt it was “the hand of God” that brought her into a leadership role with such men as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, James Farmer, A. Philip Randolph, and Roy Wilkins, and she counseled presidents from Eisenhower to Obama.

In the turbulent 1960s she organized “Wednesdays in Mississippi” to bring black and white women together to dialogue about change. Through the NCNW she organized “Operation Woman Power” in the 1970s, which assisted women in opening their own businesses. In the 1980s she started “Black Family Reunion Celebrations,” which still bring together blacks from all social and economic classes to help each other with the problems of the black community.

Height died April 20, 2010, at the age of 98. At her funeral in the National Cathedral, President Obama described her life as fitting Matthew 23:12: “whoever humbles [herself] will be exalted.”

At age 93 she said of her life, “I find through meditation and prayer that there are very few things that I do not find some way to deal with. I was interviewed by someone last year and she said, ‘You keep saying it's through your Christian faith.’ And I said, ‘I say that, because it is. I believe that God has a purpose for my being here.’ . . . We have to keep working. Justice is not impossible. We can achieve it.”



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