

ELECTION CENTRAL

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Legacy of Dorothy I. Height

Weeks ago, Director of Elections Keith Balmer was invited by Richmond Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority to celebrate the legacy of the late Dorothy I. Height.

Height was born in Richmond in 1912. Her family moved to Rankin, Pennsylvania when she was 5 years old and there, she attended an integrated school. As a student, Height was politically active and a naturally gifted public speaker, which earned her college scholarships.

She was accepted in Barnard College at Columbia University, but the offer was rescinded due to the school's unwritten policy of only admitting two Black students per year. Height instead enrolled in New York University and earned both her Bachelor's and Master's degree at the institution.

Height dedicated her time in New York to social work and worked as a staff member of Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Harlem. At YWCA, she addressed the exploitation of female domestic workers, to which she described as "slave markets."

Height's drive towards equality became clear to the marginalized communities in New York.

Social work led her to meeting Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). The organization focuses on bettering the lives of Black women, which later became the central theme of Height's work.

Height joined NCNW and in 1958, she became the president of NCNW. The organization did groundbreaking work as Height pushed for voter registration and voter education. Not only that, she pushed for scholarship programs for Black students and funded vocational training for women.



During the Civil Rights Movement, she campaigned against voter suppression alongside Martin Luther King Jr. When King gave his "I have a Dream" speech, it was clear that Height was the only woman in the crowd next to King.

She was the president of NCNW until 1990. Height retired in 1996 after securing funding for NCNW national headquarters. The historic Central National Bank building in Washington D.C. was renamed to Dorothy I. Heights Building.

Her dedication as a civil rights activist earned her a spot in the "Big Six," a group of prominent civil rights figures. Height was a pioneer in intersectionality: addressing the issues of the unique experiences based on race, gender, and class.

Height's legacy lives on and is continued by generations of women, Black Americans, and more specifically Black American women.

Height died in 2010 in Washington D.C. Former President Barack Obama delivered an eulogy at her funeral in which he described her as "the Godmother of the Civil Rights Movement and a hero to many Americans."

Director Balmer's Speech



Members of the Richmond Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and National Council of Negro Women with Director Balmer.

This speech was given on March 22 at the Hull Street Library.

“Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, and distinguished members of the Richmond Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, it is with great honor and humility that I stand before you today as we celebrate the remarkable life and legacy of Dr. Dorothy Height. As the first black General Registrar for Richmond, Virginia, I am acutely aware of the significance of Dr. Height's contributions to the civil rights movement and her unwavering dedication to equality and justice for all.

Born in our very own Richmond in 1912, Dr. Height's journey from Rankin High School in Pennsylvania to becoming one of the most influential women in the modern civil rights movement is nothing short of inspirational. From her early activism against lynching and criminal justice reform in the 1930s to her pivotal role as the president of the National Council of Negro Women for four decades, Dr. Height's impact reverberates through history.

Dr. Height was a trailblazer in every sense of the word. She was not only a tireless advocate for the rights of African Americans but also a staunch champion for women's equality. Her visionary leadership united the struggles for racial and gender justice, recognizing the inherent interconnectedness of these movements. She understood that true progress could only be achieved by addressing the intersecting forms of oppression faced by marginalized communities.

Throughout her illustrious career, Dr. Height worked alongside iconic figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Roy Wilkins,

earning her a well-deserved place among the "Big Six" of the civil rights movement. Her remarkable ability to bridge divides and foster dialogue was instrumental in advancing the cause of civil rights during some of the most tumultuous times in our nation's history.

Dr. Height's impact extended far beyond her role as a civil rights leader. As a social worker and educator, she dedicated her life to empowering others and dismantling systemic barriers to equality. Her commitment to education, voter registration, and political mobilization laid the groundwork for generations of activists to come.

However, as we gather here today to celebrate Dr. Height's legacy, we cannot ignore the ongoing challenges that threaten the progress she fought so hard to achieve. The erosion of voting rights, exacerbated by recent Supreme Court decisions and discriminatory voter laws, continues to disenfranchise communities of color across the country.

We must also confront issues such as political gerrymandering and felony disenfranchisement, which disproportionately impact Black voters and undermine the principles of democracy. Despite these obstacles, Dr. Height's steadfast determination reminds us that the fight for justice is far from over.

As we honor Dr. Dorothy Height on what would have been her birthday, let us reaffirm our commitment to carrying forward her legacy. Let us stand united in the struggle for equality, justice, and the right to vote for all. And let us draw inspiration from her extraordinary life as we continue the march toward a more just and equitable society.