

Women in Black History

Light drives out darkness and love conquers hate. If the times aren't ripe, then you have to ripen the times, Dorothy Height reminds us.

When one looks at the contributions of black women in history it becomes clear that they were undeniable sources of light and love. The literature is filled with examples of the rich and royal roles that black women have filled and how they were able to inspire others. We find that the impact of black women is often overlooked in the literature.

Black women have housed, fed, cared for their families and faced the brunt of wars and pestilences. They have played important roles in freedom movements and in so doing inspired others to face the future with confidence. Over the years these women have held up the sky and have struggled against great odds to make a change in their communities.

The history of the United States is filled with exciting stories of black women that have helped to raise political and social consciousness. The well-known names surface in the media when special events are celebrated. But how about those who made their contributions and are not in the limelight? The purpose of this article is to highlight the activities of these lesser known women so that readers can appreciate their work and legacies.

Elizabeth also known as 'Old Elizabeth' was born around 1765 in slavery. She was exposed to religion early while growing up in Maryland. Her father read the Bible to the family regularly and when she was eleven Elizabeth suffered personal pain. She was sold to a plantation miles away and that meant separation from her family. Elizabeth converted to Christianity but this did not prevent her from being sold twice more. By the time she was thirty Elizabeth became a preacher and was a fervent supporter of Emancipation.

Her memoir was published in 1863 and we

found that Elizabeth had traveled to Canada and 'visited several settlements of coloured people, and felt an open door amongst them.' There is no doubt that she was able to break barriers as a woman minister and was perhaps among the first in her time to preach against the evils of slavery.

We have read about the resistance of Rosa Parks who in 1955 refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus. Parks was arrested and thrown into jail and this triggered the famous Alabama bus strike with Martin Luther King playing a major role. But students of Black History would do well to know that on July 16, 1854 another lady defied the system and won a famous victory. She was Elizabeth Jennings. The young lady was on her way to church where she was an organist. She was running late and hailed the nearest horse-drawn streetcar.

The conductor asked Jennings to leave the car and she refused. He then tried to have the upper hand. If any white passenger objected 'I'll put you out,' said the conductor. Jennings replied that she was born and raised in New York and wasn't about to leave the car. A tussle ensued and a police officer entered the car and forcibly removed Jennings. But like Rosa Parks Jennings had the support of powerful voices and they included ministers, abolitionists and journalists. Jennings used her contacts and her story was published in the 'New York Daily Tribune'. A lawyer, Chester Arthur, was hired by the family and he won the case against the Third Avenue Railway Company. The judge ruled that 'colored persons if sober, well behaved, and free

from disease could not be excluded from public conveniences by any rules of the company, nor by force or violence.'

This was a landmark decision, given the racial composition of New York and by 1859 almost all of the streetcar lines were accessible to the African-American population. Elizabeth Jennings won a settlement against the Railway Company in the sum of \$550 but she only received half because some members of the jury 'had peculiar notions as to colored people's rights.' Chester Arthur, incidentally, went on to become President of the United States in 1881. Did the actions of Jennings influence Rosa Parks a hundred years later? One can't be sure



Bessie Blount

but Jennings and Parks shared a similar history and commitment. There is, however, an important civil rights leader that inspired Rosa Parks, and others, and she is Septima Clark.

Septima Clark has been called 'The Mother of the Civil Rights Movement.' She realized the importance of education and the impact it can have to transform society. Septima was born in 1898 in South Carolina and she experienced the effects of slavery at first hand as her father was a slave. Her mother grew up in Haiti before migrating to the United States. It is said that Septima Clark's courage and moral character 'was a driving force behind the Civil Rights

Movement.'

Septima was a teacher in South Carolina where she taught for forty years. She was fired because she would not give up her membership of the NAACP. Septima decided to train black and white students that wanted to see change in America. One student in her class was Rosa Parks and three months after



Septima Clark

leaving Parks was at the center of the Montgomery bus boycott.

But Septima was not done as she worked hard to set up Citizenship Schools, the aim of which was to teach blacks to read and write so they could pass the literacy tests. According to one report,

the schools taught blacks basic literacy, including how to write their names, balance their checkbooks and read road signs.' The schools also taught blacks about the way in which the government works, the American Constitution and the importance of voting. Septima earned the praise of Dr. Martin Luther King and in 1979 she was given the Living Legacy Award by President Jimmy Carter.

Bessie Blount Griffin was a physical therapist, inventor and scientist all rolled into one. She was born in Virginia and was trained as a nurse in New Jersey. She worked with wounded soldiers during the Second World War. It was this experience that led Bessie to design a

device that would enable the disabled to be fed by 'biting down on a tube.' She received a patent for a 'Portable Receptacle Support' and teamed up with Theodore Edison, son of Thomas Edison, to produce cardboard regurgitation basins.

In the sixties Bessie turned her attention to forensic science. She became the chief document officer in the Police Department in Norfolk. Bessie then applied to Scotland Yard and became the first black woman to work there. On her return to the United States Bessie worked on historical records and continued her research into physical therapy. As she poignantly states, 'A black woman can invent something for the



Dorothy Height

benefit of humankind.'

In the sixties when the Civil Rights Movement was in the news Diane Nash was a leader of the student movement. She was a strong believer in non-violence and worked to integrate lunch counters. One of her projects was to get Blacks in the South to register to vote through the Selma Voting Rights Movement. Diane Nash was born in Chicago and studied at Fisk University where she saw racial segregation at first hand.

She organized protests in 1960 against segregation at lunch counters and the movement grew to the point where Nashville's Mayor Ben West publicly called for desegregation. This was achieved in May



Dr. Dhanpaul Narine

1960. A year later Nash organized Freedom Rides in the South and helped to break down the barriers of segregation. Nash and her husband James Bevel received the 'Rosa Parks' award from Dr. Martin Luther King in 1965 for their work in the field of civil rights.

Dorothy Height has been called the godmother of the civil rights movement, and the founding matriarch, according to the Washington Post. She lobbied for civil rights during the Harlem protests, helped to get Eleanor Roosevelt involved in the movement, stood on the platform beside Dr. Martin Luther King and persuaded President Eisenhower to act on school desegregation.

Height was the President of the National Council of Negro Women for over forty years. She was born in Richmond, Virginia in 1912 and attended New York University where she studied psychology. In 1952 she was a visiting professor at the Delhi School of Social Work in India. She was also interested in the welfare of women in developing countries and studied women's organizations in Liberia, Ghana, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. During the heyday of apartheid Height lectured to the Black Women's Federation in South Africa.

She received the Congressional Gold Medal in 2004 and was awarded 36 Honorary Doctorate Degrees from various universities. Today, the Civil Rights movement is richer because of the contributions of these dedicated women.

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of THE WEST INDIAN.