

PROFILE – Dorothy Height

Narrator:

This month on UMC.org Profiles, Dorothy Height, civil rights advocate, shares her faith story.

Dorothy Height has spent nearly half a century fighting for equality and human rights for all people. She's worked alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and has been an adviser to six U.S. presidents. In 1989, she was awarded the Presidential Citizenship Medal by President Ronald Reagan. In 1994, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Bill Clinton. And in 2004, she was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President George W. Bush. For over 30 years Height worked with the YWCA, where she took on many leadership roles, fueled by her commitment to rise above the limitations of race and gender. One of these roles was as Director of the Center for Racial Justice, a position she held from 1965 until 1977. Height also served as national president of Delta Sigma Theta sorority, and later assumed the presidency of the National Council of Negro Women. As president of NCNW, she led a crusade for justice for black women and worked to strengthen the black family. She retired in 1998, and is currently the Chair and President Emerita. Now at 93 years old, Height's life continues to exemplify her passionate commitment for a just society and her vision for a better world.

Dorothy Height:

I suppose my earliest influences were with my parents. They were both very active in church circles. My father was a contractor, builder, developer, and painter, but in the church he was the choir master, the superintendent of Sunday school, and a deacon. My mother was very active in mission work and the like. As a child I joined the church, and then I became very active in all of the children's missions – the choir, the Sunday school, every aspect of the church – so that my earliest grounding came in the church.

When I was 11 years old, the little town that I grew up in, all of my neighbors were Hungarian, were from Eastern Europe really, and they had a building called the Rankin Christian Center. It was at first a little shanty, and then later it became a beautiful building. But it was for foreign born only. And one day I suggested to the head of the center, who I used to come and sit and talk with when she had just the little shanty, now I could go into her nice office and talk to her. And I explained to her that the children, the Hungarian children, fought all the time. The little kindergarteners, they needed somebody who could tell them Bible stories and teach them songs

and the like. And she said she thought it was a good idea, and I said to her, "Well, I can do it." And so she let me.

Years later, when I was finishing my master's degree at New York University, I had worked for the Brooklyn Church in Mission Federation in the Brownville Community Center, and the minister who's in charge of it was sorry they couldn't hire me, but I'm talking about 1932, and there were no jobs and he had no money. So he took me before the board of the Church in Mission Federation and as I told about my work, they were very much interested. They knew what I had been doing, because I'd been servicing the poor in the highest delinquency area of the city in part of Brooklyn. And finally the woman who was chairing the meeting turned to me and said, "You told me about your work. Now tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up?" So I said, "Rankin," which I didn't think anybody knew about Rankin. And she looked at me and she said, "I visited the Rankin Christian Center." She said, "Do you know where it was?" I said, "Yes." I said, "I lived across the street from it." And she said, "Mr. Carpenter, I will pay this girl's salary." Because she had been there when I was teaching the Hungarian children. And from that day to this, I've never been in the job market, because everything I've done has come to me in some way like that. So from early in my life, I had a sense that there was some purpose for my life.

Usually I'm asked about what it meant to me to work along with Dr. King and Roy Wilkins, the great leaders in the civil rights movement. And I always have to say I felt fine doing it. But I think what is seldom known is that the civil rights movement laid bare the issues not only of discrimination and racism, but of poverty. So for me, it has been not only those things that have reached publicity, but those things that are not so well known. For me, some of the most gratifying experiences were those working with poor people, particularly in states like Mississippi where we had to deal with farmers who had lost their work, where there were no factories, no places to work, and people were being made to take work for ten and fifteen dollars a week just to stay alive. And I found myself deeply involved through the National Council of Negro Women working with programs like school breakfasts for children, like dealing with hunger issues and malnutrition, providing community gardens and community freezers so that families could preserve food, and the problems with children and housing.

And even today as we witness Katrina, I have a very close tie with 200 families who we helped to develop the first home ownership program for low income families. Families who earned less than \$10,000 a year. And those families, with our help, were able to get HUD to respond to them. Those families had 25 years to pay for those houses, and they had just done so. And they celebrated, and then months later along comes Katrina. And when I look now and

think what it means to see those houses that they were so proud to have made their final payments and have those deeds in their hands, see them under water, and see the families displaced. I feel that we have to now really deal with the issue of poverty. The world now knows that we have poverty. We see it in other lands, but we have to deal with it here. I think we have to deal with the issue of homelessness, but also to see that these people have decent housing, and that they have jobs. We have to protect the rights of all of these people as citizens.

I think I learned a lot about what it means to work with people, rather than for them. I've always been driven by that sense of purpose that you have, that there is something here for you to do. I remember one meeting that Eleanor Roosevelt held with United Methodist Women in Atlanta, and it was about human rights, and she was talking about the universal declaration of human rights, and Mrs. Tilly had organized a group called the Fellowship of the Concerned, in which women, particularly white women, went into the courts when there was going to be a poor person or a black person tried, and they simply watched to see that justice was done. And I remember that Mrs. Tilly said the women, when asked why there were there, they simply said, "I'm concerned." And I think that it was experiences like that that helped me to realize that you have to have a kind of ministry of service that means you don't stand off and look at it, but you go into the situation and see what you can do. That you put yourself into it.

I believe with all my heart that the reason I find it satisfying and gratifying to be with and to work with people of all backgrounds is because it's not a special effort. I think that we need to have more opportunities where people all worship together, and work together, and live together, so that we can have more of a sense of community. To be a community of equals. And whatever our diversity, to look out for each other. I think a part of the poverty that we have is because there is a feeling that, "Those people don't need it," whatever it is, if it's an advantage. We don't have that feeling when we get to know everybody. When we get to know one another, we have more of a sense of our needing each other, and needing to join hands, if not embrace, certainly at least join hands to see how we work together to make a better society. I feel at home with people whoever they are. And I've worked on five of the continents, and I find that to be the same. Even when I don't know the language, I find some way to relate to people.

I believe, in fact I know there is a God because I have seen myself through so many different things. I'm very fortunate to have family and close working friends and people of faith with whom I share. But I think through it all I have developed a strong sense of self-reliance that is deeply rooted. 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 said, I believe that

God has a purpose for my being here.” And I’m driven by that realization. And even now that I am 93, when things happen, I try to do whatever I can, even though I can’t move the way I used to move, can’t get about the same way, but I never give up. I just keep feeling that social justice is not some kind of utopia, I think it’s a positive reality, and we have to work at it. And I therefore join hands with people, sometimes I don’t agree with everything they say, but I join hands with them on social justice matters because I believe that’s what you have to do. And I feel grateful that I have people I can turn to and call upon. And who I know will be there and who help to reinforce my desire to make a difference. And in the end, it may not be that I achieved it all, but I will certainly want it to be known that I tried.

Narrator:

Our thanks to Dr. Dorothy Height for sharing her story with us.

This month’s Profile was produced by Pam Price; interview by Erik Alsgaard; editor was Lane Denson. I’m Hilly Hicks and Profiles is brought to you by UMC.org, the official online ministry of The United Methodist Church, a ministry of United Methodist Communications.