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*Change has always been Benjamin Hooks' game. With new federal support for his on-campus Institute for Social Change, the civil rights leader is preserving the past while offering a vision for the future.*

## Train of Thought

by Benjamin Potter

Most people might mention the Ned R. McWherter Library or the Art Museum when discussing campus gems, but another treasure is locked quietly away behind the door to 431 Clement Hall at The University of Memphis.



**Benjamin Hooks stops briefly by a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stained-glass window inside the National Civil Rights Museum after finishing an interview with the BBC in June.**

The room is filled with box upon box of papers donated by civil rights icon Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks, a U of M distinguished adjunct professor of political science and history. The room in Clement Hall may not seem visually impressive, but the boxes contain a first-hand account of some of the most pivotal events of the past 50 years in this country.

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Coinciding with the Hooks donation, a number of faculty members have established the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change. With new financial support from Congress, The U of M promises to be a continued hub of civil rights research as the Institute marches on with unwavering vigor.

### Minding the present

The support, in the form of an \$835,000 “Congressional Award,” will further strengthen an already active campus organization. The

Hooks Institute, along with managing the archives project, sponsors the “Civil Rights Movement in the Schools” program, the “Hooks Symposia and Lecture” series, the “Working and Occasional Papers” series and a memoirs project.

A triumvirate of U of M professors helped establish the Institute: Dr. David Mason, former professor and chair of political science; David Madlock, adviser of political science; and Dr. Doug Imig, associate professor of political science. Mason says the Institute attempts to connect research, education and public outreach to stress the continuing relevance of struggles for equality. Imig adds, “We’ve got something for everyone.”

The something-for-everyone approach begins with Memphis’ youngest citizens. The Institute brings between 400 and 600 sixth-graders to campus each year for the “Civil Rights in the Schools” project.

“We want to start the children off early on the path to effective citizenship,” Madlock (BA ’73, MA ’77) says.

The day-long program, which was featured on C-SPAN in 2000, focuses on the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, which is now more than a generation removed from today’s youth. The U of M College of Education collaborated with the Institute in the creation of a teacher’s guide so area educators could continue the learning process back in the classroom.

Imig says he hopes the program will not only educate children about the Civil Rights Movement, but also spark an early interest in college.

“This year, one of the children asked, ‘How can a kid like me afford to go to college?’” Imig says. “Dr. Raines was there and said, ‘If you do your part and keep your grades up, there’ll be a space for you here at this University and a way to pay for it.’”

The symposia and lectures, meanwhile, are geared toward college students and the public. One recent speaker, Dr. Marion Orr from Brown University, spoke about finding community leaders beyond the corporate world. Leading to a smart, passionate discussion about community revitalization, the lecture was a prime example of the high-caliber associations the Institute has sought out.

The latest symposium brought three notable black mayors to campus: Richard Hatcher of Gary, Ind.; David Dinkins, former mayor of New York City; and Memphis’ own Willie Herenton (MA ’66). The trio talked about their experiences of being the first black mayors in their respective cities.

Many agree that a key to achieving complete equality is through the

acquisition and distribution of knowledge. The Institute has mimicked a sponge — soaking up information and squeezing it back out — and the Congressional Award gives a much-needed boost to that effort.

“We’ve been fortunate,” Imig says of the award. “A wide range of groups has been excited by what we’re trying to achieve.” Nike has been an active supporter from the beginning, and other corporate sponsors have since joined the list, including Chick-Fil-A and Bank of Bartlett.

But the Institute has more than just monetary support — it has political teeth. Imig says Hooks’ longtime involvement in the civil rights arena has made current connections possible.

“Dr. Hooks has fought the good fight for many years, and the friends he has made in that time are strong supporters,” he says. “This has been a bipartisan effort. Hooks has a long legacy of support from and for Democrats and Republicans. He’s been able to ‘play politics’ in a very collegial way.”

### **Honoring the past**

Given his credentials, it should come as no surprise that Hooks has been able to operate with such political harmony. He served as the first black appointee to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and as executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Just as important, though, are other titles he’s taken over the years: lawyer, corporate board chair, businessman, minister, husband, father.

Hooks was born in 1925 in Memphis, where he grew up and attended LeMoyne College in 1941. School was soon set on the back burner as Hooks entered the U.S. Army and served in World War II. Guarding Italian prisoners of war who had more rights than he did, Hooks began to take great interest in social change.

“In Italy, we saw a place that was not segregated based on color,” Hooks says. “It dawned on me that those of us in the Army had to realize change was coming in U.S. racial relations. From my own point, I wanted to have a part in that change.”

After the war, Hooks resumed his studies, heading to DePaul University in Chicago for his law degree because no law school in Tennessee was enrolling black students. In 1948, he graduated and returned to Memphis and married Frances Dancy, an elementary school teacher, in 1951.

Law wasn’t Hooks’ only career interest. He became an ordained Baptist minister in 1956. Anyone who has heard his rich, captivating voice can understand why.

“Once he gets a hold of you verbally, you can’t help but be moved,”

Madlock says. "It's a great thing to hear him speak."

Church activities steered him toward Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and eventually the NAACP. Life in the field of law led him to the Shelby County Criminal Court, where he became the first black criminal court judge in Tennessee.

Hooks stepped onto the national political scene in 1972, when then-President Richard Nixon appointed him to the FCC. In 1977, he took the helm of the NAACP, a post he would hold for 15 years.

"We won a lot and lost a lot," Hooks says. "It was a highly demanding job. We had a small staff of about 130 individuals scattered across the country, and everything in the civil rights field came to us. Both the highlights and the lowlights came from doing so much. There was tension, triumph, pressure."

Hooks announced his retirement from the NAACP in 1992, but he still is active at his church and on The U of M campus. Moreover, he has remained committed to his family and celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary in 2001.

### **Shaping the future**

Throughout his professional career, Hooks had stowed away a staggering number of documents: papers, court cases, memos and photographs that total an estimated 750,000 pages. That's nearly 400 boxes — if the papers could be put into a single stack, it would be 450 feet tall.

The boxes had been stored in an outside storage shed at Hooks' church until 1999, where humidity and temperature variations were beginning to take a toll on the documents. The professors packed up the boxes and moved them to a temperature-controlled room in Clement Hall and began filing the contents into acid-neutral boxes.

Now, two years later, the filing process is almost complete, but this step is merely "phase one" in a larger plan. During "phase two," a professional project archivist will be hired to sort, label and analyze the material. "Phase three" will see a construction of a Web site to house the newly organized material online.

Mason says the archival process will help to further establish Memphis as an information hub for Civil Rights-era issues.

"Memphis is an important site for the Civil Rights Movement, and not just because Martin Luther King Jr. was killed here," he says, adding that a possible collaboration is pending with the National Civil Rights Museum.

"It would be a natural match," he says. "The U of M brings a set of

academic resources, while the museum will be able to make the subject matter come alive.”

Aside from the Congressional Award, the Institute had applied for grant money from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Though the application was turned down, friends in Washington D.C. sent warm words praising the Institute.

U.S. Congressman Harold Ford Jr. wrote in “strong support” of the Institute, calling it an “invaluable tool” and saying that Hooks’ donated papers “document the extraordinary life of a man dedicated to human rights and equal justice.”

U.S. Senator Fred Thompson (BS ’64) also wrote to the NEH in support, noting that “the Hooks Institute will continue that commitment [to civil rights] at an institution of higher learning dedicated to the ongoing study of civil rights issues and social change.”

One plan for the near future is to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education* in 2004. The desegregation case is considered a monumental legal breakthrough.

“Many of the victories of the movement were legal victories,” Madlock says. “The Civil Rights Movement wasn’t just about people protesting in the streets. Dr. Hooks wants that to be conveyed. He really believes in the legal process.”

Whatever the course the Hooks Institute will steer in years to come, the thirst for knowledge and understanding of the Civil Rights Movement will be continual. As Madlock says, “Dr. Hooks never slows down,” and as Hooks himself said nearly 20 years ago, “we shall press on, we shall press on, we shall press on.”

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