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The University of Memphis Remembers Civil Rights

Leader Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks

The University of Memphis is deeply saddened by the death of Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks, who passed away on April 15, 2010. Dr. Hooks lived a remarkable life. He devoted himself to the welfare of his family, community and nation. University President Shirley C. Raines offered her condolences to the Hooks family, saying, "Our sympathies go to Mrs. Hooks, their daughter, Pat, members of the Greater Middle Baptist Church, and all whose lives were inspired by Dr. Benjamin Hooks. We are privileged to have the Benjamin Hooks Institute at the University of Memphis. We promise to keep alive the legacy of this giant of a man and civil rights leader and to provide a place where scholars can study his papers and great works. Our condolences to all who were influenced for the greater good by Dr. Hooks."

Dr. Hooks held the position of Distinguished Adjunct Faculty Member in the Department of Political Science and History at the U of M. He made a significant and lasting contribution to the intellectual and civic life of the University and greater community through his support of the founding of The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis. The Institute was founded in 1996 to honor its civil rights pioneer namesake and to support racial, social and economic justice for communities in need. The mission of the Institute is to preserve the history of the American Civil Rights Movement and to advance the legacy of that Movement through scholarship and community action.

The Hooks Institute began with the approval of the Tennessee Board of Regents and funding from the U.S. Congress and the State of Tennessee. These funders recognized the pivotal role of the Institute in shaping and solving community problems through the witness and wisdom of pioneers like Benjamin L. Hooks. The Hooks Institute archives include Hooks' personal papers, which are housed in the Mississippi Valley Collection in the U of M's McWherter Library.

Dr. Hooks actively participated in the life of the Institute. In 2009, he inaugurated a new speakers' series on Capitol Hill and at the U of M sponsored by the Hooks Institute. The theme of the series was *Civil Rights and Social Justice: Past, Present and Future*. On October 6 on Capitol Hill and November 4 at the U of M, Hooks shared his insights on the profound changes in American society that flowed from the American Civil Rights Movement, while also addressing the urgency of eliminating remaining racial, economic, and other disparities in America. His U of M speech can be viewed in its entirety at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-y7VzIUf03A>.

On the passing of Dr. Hooks, Daphne R. McFerren, the Hooks Institute Director, said, "The nation and this community have lost a seminal civil rights activist who dedicated his entire life to social justice and to creating a nation that would honor its highest founding principle - that all people are created equal. While I am deeply saddened by the death of Dr. Hooks, he made it clear to me and many others with whom he worked that when we dedicate ourselves to improving the welfare of others, our legacies continue to live. Dr. Hooks left a legacy that forms a solid foundation upon which to build the future work of the Hooks Institute."

A native of Memphis, Benjamin Hooks was born in 1925, the fifth of seven children of Robert and Bessie Hooks. His parents were both hard-working people, and his grandmother was the second African-American woman in the United States to graduate from Berea College in Kentucky. As a result, he was encouraged to do well in his studies and to prepare for higher education.

University News

[Video: Yes we can! A tribute to Dr. Hooks](#)
[Video: Dr. Hooks explains the purpose of his legacy, the Hooks Institute for Social Change](#)
[Biography of Dr. Hooks](#)
[The Hooks Institute for Social Change](#)
[Video: Dr. Hooks speech given on November 4th, 2009—Are There No More Cats to Bell?](#)

Hooks enrolled in pre-law at LeMoyne College (now LeMoyne-Owen College) in Memphis and then served his country in the Second World War. He found himself in the humiliating position of guarding Italian prisoners who were allowed to eat in restaurants that were off limits to him. This experience strengthened his resolve to battle bigotry.

Hooks earned his law degree in 1948 at DePaul University in Chicago and promptly returned to Tennessee, a state that had no law school that would admit him, vowing to break down segregation. He passed the Tennessee bar examination and opened his own law practice, confronting prejudice at every turn. After joining the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Hooks felt called to the ministry and was ordained a Baptist minister in 1956. He began preaching regularly at the Greater Middle Baptist Church in Memphis. He was a pioneer in NAACP-sponsored restaurant sit-ins and other boycotts. He entered state politics in 1954, making unsuccessful bids for the state legislature and juvenile court judge. By 1965, he was well known enough that Tennessee Governor Frank G. Clement appointed him to fill a vacancy on the Shelby County Criminal Court. He thus became the first African-American judge in a court of record in the South. The following year he ran as a candidate for that position and won that election.

In 1972, President Richard Nixon appointed Hooks as the first African-American member of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). During his tenure, he addressed the lack of minority ownership of television and radio stations, the lack of minority employment in the broadcasting industry, and the image of blacks in the mass media.

On November 6, 1976, Hooks was elected Executive Director of the NAACP, a position he held until 1992.

In 2007, Hooks was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom - the nation's highest civil award. "The nation best remembers Benjamin Hooks as the leader of the NAACP" said President George W. Bush in awarding Dr. Hooks the Medal of Freedom. "For 15 years, Dr. Hooks was a calm yet forceful voice for fairness, opportunity, and personal responsibility. He never tired or faltered in demanding that our nation live up to its founding ideals of liberty and equality. His testimony had special power - for the words he spoke and for the example he set as a man of decency and rectitude."

Founded in 1912, the University of Memphis is a comprehensive metropolitan research university that is recognized nationally and internationally for its academic, research, and athletic programs. With more than 21,000 students, the U of M offers more than 254 areas of study for those seeking Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees. It also offers the juris doctor (law) and education specialist degrees.