



"Unless the People Have a Vision"
The Life of Frances Dancy Hooks (1927-2016)

A Presentation for Women's History Month

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Introduction:

On December 5, 1976, the Commercial Appeal published a story on Frances Dancy Hooks, the wife of lawyer, judge, civil rights activist, and Memphis native, Dr. Benjamin L. Hooks.¹ As Dr. Hooks would soon assume the position of executive director for the NAACP, the Memphis community was spotlighting both him and his wife, though as story author Nickii Elrod recognized, Frances Hooks was much more than a wife. While Mrs. Hooks had strongly supported Dr. Hooks' career throughout their 25-year marriage, she had also "remained her own woman – a blend of gentility and fierce independence, spirituality, and toughness, all tempered with a brilliant sense of humor."

In many respects, Mrs. Hooks was now benefitting from opportunities available to her and her husband in the aftermath of the classical Civil Rights era. In her interview, she self-deprecatingly laughed as she remembered her chauffeured limousine rides to the White House and her Washington D.C. home valued at 150,000 dollars (640,000 in inflated 2016 dollars), all benefits she received from her husband's appointment as commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) under the presidency of Richard Nixon.

Yet, Mrs. Hooks recalled with acute memory the many trials she and her husband had endured to achieve such benefits. She recalled being in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the day of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, an experience that created a wound "she never expects to heal." She also participated in the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama and recounted, "I was not feeling well anyway, but insisted on going with Benny. And right now, I have only to close my eyes to see the slashing hatred that showed so vividly on the face of every white person we encountered. . . . I have no words to describe it."

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all materials referenced in this essay stem from the Benjamin Lawson Hooks Papers (MSS 445), housed in the Special Collections of the University of Memphis library.

As an advocate for African-American civil rights, many of her worst memories came at the hands of discriminating white individuals, but one of her most formative experiences stemmed from a case of unanticipated discrimination. Years earlier as a freshman at Howard University in Washington D.C., she was engaged to a young African man, the son of Liberia's vice president. As a dark skinned African man, her fiancé admired Frances's own dark skin, but during the planning of their wedding, he "gently but firmly" warned that her light-skinned family would never be welcome in Liberia. Thus, a major heartbreak occurred not at the expense of being too Black, but being too American and perhaps even too white. She recalled angrily, "That young man was welcome in any Washington restaurant he chose to go. But I could go with him only if I kept my mouth shut, so no one would know that I was an American Negro." Refusing to marry anyone so callous and dismissive of her family, she broke the engagement. She eventually left Howard, spent a year at Wilberforce in Ohio before finishing her Bachelor's degree in Education from Fisk University in Nashville, TN.

Upon returning to the Memphis area, she met and married Ben Hooks, whom she affectionately called "Benny," and taught for such schools as Barrett's Chapel and Mt. Pigsah where she learned firsthand the challenges facing Black children in public education. She continued to teach in the Memphis area, becoming one of the first Black women to teach for the Memphis city school system at Carver High school, a position she held until moving with her husband to Washington D.C.

In the aftermath of the Commercial Appeal article, she would relocate to New York with her husband, as he began his position with the NAACP. Over the course of his tenure at the NAACP, Mrs. Hooks joined his side giving up her career as a teacher to become his personal secretary. In addition to these duties, she organized such NAACP subsidiary organizations as WIN (Women in NAACP) and spoke on behalf of the NAACP to address the outstanding issues of the Black community in the immediate decades following the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. She maintained this position until Dr. Hooks' retirement from the NAACP in 1993.

“Take up your Bed and Walk,” The Speeches and Writings of Frances Hooks:

As a staff member and public advocate for the NAACP, Mrs. Hooks gave several speeches to various groups throughout her tenure with the NAACP. Some were given to African-American organizations, schools, and women’s groups, while others were sermons in churches. While these speeches do not represent a systematic and comprehensive framework designed to address all of the problems of the Black community and Black women, they do showcase how Mrs. Hooks advocated on behalf of the African-American community at large while also advocating specifically for African-American women.

When addressing the initiatives of the African-American community, Mrs. Hooks, like Dr. Hooks, often worked to articulate the needs of an African-American community experiencing devastating poverty while certain individuals of the Black community experienced unprecedented success. In an unidentified and undated speech that likely stems from the early 1980s and given before a church audience, Mrs. Hooks compared the plight of the Black community to the story of the man who waited by the pool of Bethesda in the Gospel of John, chapter 5. She noted that he waited for 38 years to be “pushed” into the water until Jesus told him to “take up his bed and walk.”

Following this analogy, she outlined how throughout the twentieth century, the Black community had consistently through non-violent and direct action, struggled to achieve freedom and equality under the law. These tactics had achieved major successes from voting rights, to access to education, to housing access, to the promotion of Black businesses. This extended period marked a time of increasing success where “Blacks moved in record numbers from the ghettos” and “Black elected officials found their way to the city halls, court houses, state houses, and into the federal government.” Black Americans also began to “climb corporate ladders . . . where they could at least observe some of the decision-making process.”

Yet, in the era of Ronald Reagan, Black communities and institutions were now facing a new threat in the form of “systems.” The problem was no longer as simple as discrimination of the Black community at the hands of the white. Rather, discrimination might very well come from a fellow Black person who was now part of an establishment:

A Black felon might be arrested by a BLACK POLICE OFFICER. A Black criminal might appear before a BLACK JUDGE and be prosecuted by a Black district attorney. A Black citizen may complain to a Black mayor. Black school children and parents might receive educational benefits from a school system presided over a Black superintendent. Black community groups deal with Black urban planners. Black business persons deal with Black financiers. Many of us are frustrated because the “adversary” may be a person of the same color, “in the boat but not of the boat”.

Indeed, not only were some Black Americans now participating in oppressive systems, but certain whites were demonstrating extraordinary capacity to aid the Black cause. As she wrote, “they [whites] capitalized our institutions. They helped us build schools and churches. They gave us money. Even today, take the white money out of Black institutions and programs, and where would we be?”

Thus, the era of Reagan informed by new policies, represented a new time for the Black community to take up their bed and not wait for the help of the federal government or the civilian white community. This taking up the bed would, according to her, require a new Black agenda that accounted for the new realities of poverty in the Black community and was sustained by Black institutions and Black businesses investing in Black communities.

While Mrs. Hooks often spoke in a general and systemic sense, she also addressed the specific problems of the Black community. As a former teacher, Mrs. Hooks was very passionate about education. In a speech before the Compensatory Education Board meeting in Texas in 1989, she highlighted the importance of the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 and argued that education must be the foundation of all community initiatives. In this particular context, compensatory schooling was of the utmost importance as it invested in the hope of those who needed it most. And

talented teachers were needed now more than ever to invest in such important schools. Yet, as she would say in another speech given to a Scholarship commission, teachers alone could not provide the atmosphere. It was incumbent on parents to involve themselves intimately in the education process. As she wrote, "I encourage parents to visit schools, to talk with teachers, to review report cards, to impose and maintain discipline when it comes to study habits and study." Above all, parents must understand the importance of education for Black children. Education, she stated boldly, was not an attempt to "act white." This line of thinking was antithetical to the tradition of such Black pioneers as W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Throughout her speeches, she addressed other specific issues germane to Black neighborhoods such as crime, drugs, and what she and others called the "feminization of poverty," i.e. the problem of unwed single teenage mothers in the Black community. As she stated, the feminization of poverty signified that "families headed by women, families in which women are the sole bread-winner are poor." This problem particularly plagued the Black community as, among other reasons, Black women, on average, earned less than most other demographics in the country. To Mrs. Hooks, the culprit was clear: "Poverty is the culprit, not these women. I want to emphasize that point in the strongest possible terms." When commenting on an Ebony Magazine article that illuminated the struggles of the modern Black family, she noted that Black women with small children now see "little economic sense in marrying the fathers of those children," as these men would often exacerbate the situation rather than relieve it. It was the inevitable economic situation of a single mother, with few options for sensible marriage or economic advancement that challenged the female-led household rather than any intrinsic shortcoming of single women as domestic leaders. Still, while women often bore the brunt of this poverty, it was fundamentally at its core, a crisis of the Black family. As she stated starkly in agreement with Ebony Magazine, "It may be that in this turmoil in family structures, Blacks face their greatest crisis since slavery."

This negative impact of the changing Black family on women specifically was a theme she would continue to address throughout her time with the NAACP. In a speech given to the Charleston Women's Improvement league in 1989, she used blunt language to describe the situation. As 61 percent of babies born to Black women were out of wedlock, it created a residual problem in the Black community that reinforced the issue of poor health and drug abuse. As she argued, "the drug traffic is doing more to destroy us as a people than the Ku Klux Klan and other assorted bigots have been able to do." The threat of crack and cocaine in poor communities represented potential assault on both Black bodies and the Black spirit. It engendered imminent threats to women such as prostitution, degradation, prison, and susceptibility to AIDS.

Still, Mrs. Hooks took refuge in the position of Black women throughout history. In this same speech, she argued that the Black woman has proven time and again to be a "survivor." As she argued, "Throughout our history, Black women have made an important contribution to the race. As wives and mothers and teachers, we have accepted great responsibilities." The strength of the Black woman has provided inspiring stories, especially considering that Black women have endured so much neglect. As she wrote in a draft for a speech on Black women in America, "Black women have been doubly victimized by scholarly neglect and racist assumptions. We belong to two groups traditionally treated as inferiors by American society . . . Black and women . . . we have been doubly invisible."

Mrs. Hooks' devotion to the advancement and continued success of Black women is shown most clearly in her commitment to WIN, Women in NAACP. Dr. Hooks in his memoir *The March for Civil Rights* recounted that though the NAACP had historically encouraged women in leadership roles, he suspected that women were not being properly utilized within the ranks of the organization. As he and Mrs. Hooks discussed the possibility of expanding women's roles in the NAACP, they decided to create a group called "Women in NAACP." It would be chartered as a fiscally independent branch of the

NAACP. It would not raise all of its own money, but it would appropriate its own funds for programs and initiatives it saw fit.

The first challenge was the hiring of a director. As Dr. Hooks recalled:

I knew that we did not have the money to add new personnel. Additional, if we had to recruit from the outside, we would have to do a lot of on-the-job training. . . . Very carefully, maybe even sheepishly, I asked Frances if she would volunteer to head up the WIN effort. I assure her that as soon as the program was launched and structured, we would hire someone full time to direct the effort. . . . Little did we know then that Frances would head the organization until after my retirement.”²

Mrs. Hooks initially resisted as she was already a full time assistant/secretary and overloaded with other obligations, but she agreed, nonetheless, to take on an interim position that eventually turned full time.

Under Mrs. Hooks’ leadership, WIN became in Dr. Hooks’ words, “the NAACP’s emergency relief arm.”³ They were the branch of the NAACP that helped with the Haitian Refugee crisis of 1991, and they organized shipments of food and clothing in response to the Los Angeles riots of 1992. WIN also engaged in many community education programs centered on teenage pregnancy, underachievement in schools, and scholarships to help capable students achieve their goals on both the secondary and higher education level. It even sponsored an annual fashion show that showcased both female and male fashion trends in Black culture.

In a speech given in Michigan in 1990, Mrs. Hooks addressed the work of WIN specifically. She wrote, “WIN is on the move!” She pointed out that WIN now comprised 120 units nationwide and had successfully sponsored many relief programs on behalf of the NAACP, most recently aid to the victims of Hurricane Hugo. She noted that WIN’s fundamental purpose, above all, is “to serve.” She continued, “We hope to serve the Association at every level – from local branch to national office – in fund-raising.

² Benjamin L. Hooks, *The March for Civil Rights: The Benjamin Hooks Story* (Chicago: The American Bar Association, 2004), 253.

³ *Ibid.*, 255.

And we hope to serve as a form of outreach to women.” Like her husband, she believed that female contribution to the NAACP was well established and had formatively shaped the tradition and history of the NAACP, but with WIN, women possess an even greater chance to aid the progress of the NAACP in targeted and unprecedented ways.

When she spoke or wrote of WIN, as with many of her endeavors, she did so in the language of community and hope. While she stressed the real and specific challenges to the Black community, her speeches and thoughts were sustained by a hopeful vision for the Black community. In a speech given in honor of Black History month in 1984, Mrs. Hooks argued that the significance of Black History was “not so much the individual achievements of Blacks. While it is nice to know that some person of African ancestry invented this or that or achieved this or that position, the real significance of Blacks is in the impact the race has had on the totality of American life.” Without Black history, Black progress, and Black thought, other civil rights movements for women and Native Americans may well have remained unrealized. Thus, it remains incumbent upon us to remember that without the previous struggles of past generations, modern individuals could not strive. Many Black individuals of the past were “qualified” in the very same sense that many modern Black individuals are qualified, and we must remember that their struggles opened the pathway for personal successes. As community initiatives and struggles pave the way for personal success, individuals must in turn reinvest those successes in the community for others to enjoy the same opportunities.

Conclusion:

The life of Frances Hooks was one of perseverance that was guided by faith, vision, and support from her husband. Her life, of course, was often difficult, even in the days of living in Washington D.C. and New York. In a series of journal entries from the mid-1980s, she reflected that her life had been a “series of ups and down – good times and bad – frustrations and happiness.” During these particular

entries, she felt quite lost, as she believed no one understood how she was often trivialized, faced with professional double standards, and thought of only as “his wife.” In a particularly heartfelt entry, she expressed frustrations with dealing with “petty men,” as her thoughts could be dismissed, in a rather sexist manner, as being pure gossip and without substance. She even worried that her presence in the office bred resentment from her husband, as he often dismissed her concerns as trivial. As she wrote, “How can he continue to think I am foolish enough to stay here forever or however long working as hard as anyone and be treated like it’s not for her to know. . . . Let me stop as tears well up when I think of the puppet like role I am playing.” These entries, of course, mean nothing other than she at times struggled to balance a relationship with a man both her boss and husband. When we contemplate how she sacrificed for both her family and community, it’s astonishing that she only penned a handful of grievances in the process.

We must also remember that most likely, many of her contributions to both the NAACP and her family remain unrecorded. Such is the inevitable consequence of a woman asked to do so much for an organization, all while maintaining the title of “secretary.” It is simply impossible to know how many times she set aside her own feelings for the good of her husband and the NAACP.

Perhaps these trials and sacrifices are simply indicative of a life lived at so many intersections: wife/co-worker, secretary/policy advocate, individual/member of community, and of course Black/woman. No one could possibly navigate so many intersections during such an unprecedented time in history without extensive trials and tribulations. We must look to Mrs. Hooks herself to understand how she found the energy to navigate such trials. In a sermon given to Mt. Moriah Baptist church, she addressed the need for the Black community, and community at large to maintain its vision:

Let us have a singleness of purpose. Let us walk together children and not get weary. Let us talk together children for there is going to be a great camp meeting one day in the Promised Land. And if we’re all walking together and talking together, our young people and our old people, those who have the opportunity to go to college and those who don’t, we’ll all walk so close

together as God's children, that we can sing there will be a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

Only could a woman of such integrity, with such a vision, accomplish so much on behalf of so many people. As Mrs. Hooks recently passed away in January of this year, we can only hope to use her life as a model for continuing the legacy of racial and gender equality she fought so hard to achieve.