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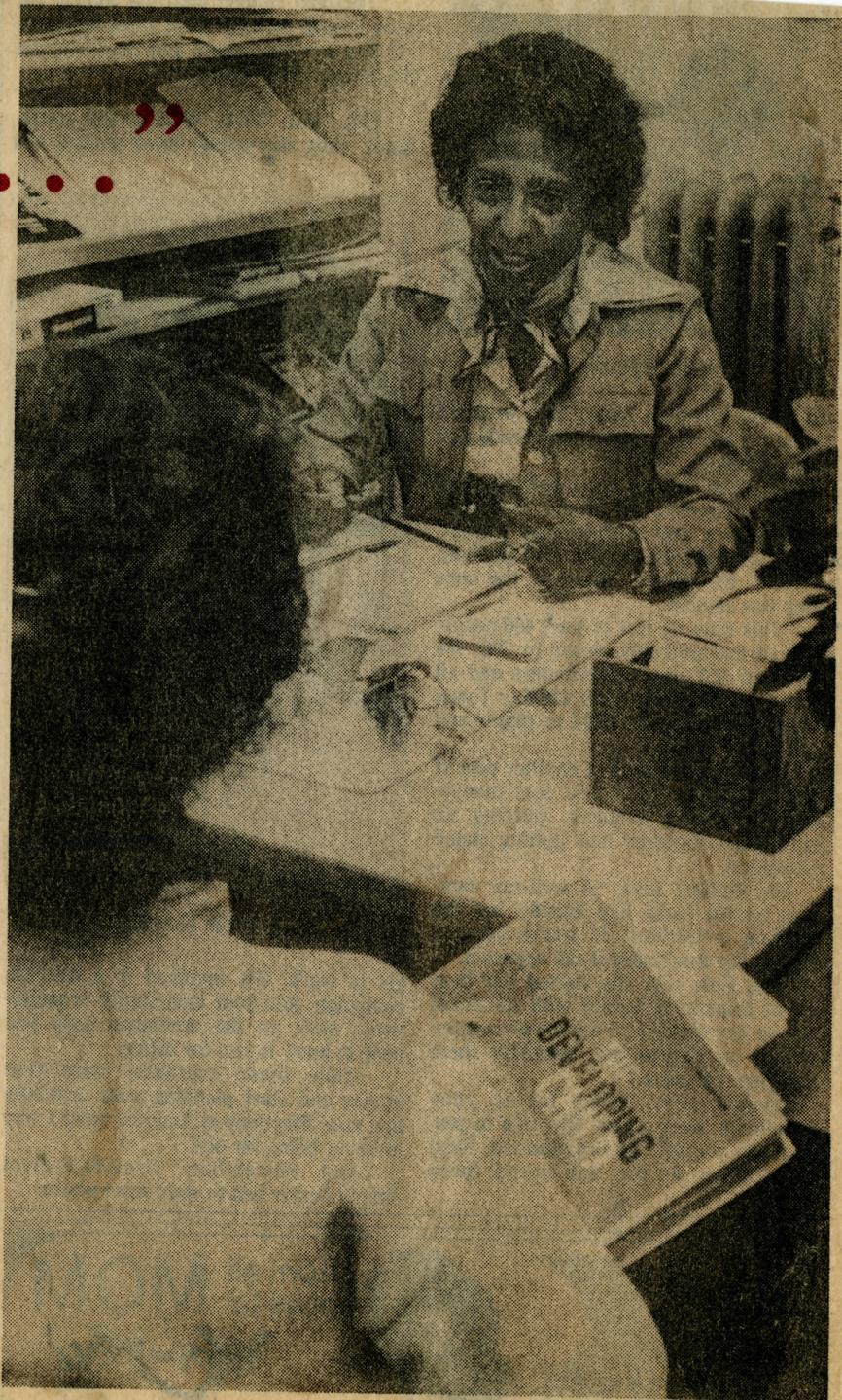
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"I Only Have To Close

My Eyes ..."

By Nickii Elrod



Frances Hooks Talks Like A 'Dutch Aunt' To A High School Student

FRANCES DANCY HOOKS is known in some circles only as the wife of NAACP director-elect Benjamin Hooks.

But among the people who work in Memphis grass roots education and minority self-help programs, she has a totally different image. These people are apt to identify the influential couple as Frances Hooks and her husband, Benny.

Both images are accurate. For 25 years of married life, she has encouraged her husband's far-ranging vision that has kept him moving steadily upward. He, in turn, has encouraged her commitment to finding educational alternatives for kids trapped behind one-way ghetto signs.

Thus, she has remained her own woman — a blend of gentility and fierce independence, spirituality and toughness, all tempered with a brilliant sense of humor.

SHORTLY AFTER Hooks was named to the Federal Communications Commission she was asked to serve as a hostess at an official presidential reception. She recalls with merriment her first brush with Washington's "great."

"Here was skinny Frances Hooks being driven by a big, white chauffeur in a big, shiny black limousine to the White House. I was laughing so hard inside at how it must look, I could hardly keep up my regal bearing."

Her reaction to househunting in Washington also resulted in some moments laced with humor. "After we

The Memphis Round Table of the National Conference of Christians and Jews announced last week that Rev. and Mrs. Ben Hooks had been named to receive the 1977 Brotherhood Award. The award will be made Feb. 21 at a banquet at Holiday Inn-Rivermont. It is the first time the award has been made to a couple.

decided we couldn't afford an apartment, I was still going back and forth to househunt on the weekend. It was really getting to be a drag.

"One night Benny called me, very excited. 'Frances, I've found a house . . . but the price is \$150,000.'

"When I got over the initial shock, I asked, 'Benny, is the White House for sale?'"

IN SPITE OF being one of the principals in the drama being acted out this century, Mrs. Hooks has never lost her sense of wonder at it all.

She says that when she is in Washington, she often wakes wondering how it happened that "Benny is out jogging with a congressman," or that her neighbors include an ambassador and a federal judge.

Recently a conflict in her husband's speaking schedule sent her to Fort Wayne, Ind., while he was before an audience in Hartford, Conn. "I found myself thinking as I stood before my audience: 'Whatever can I say that is important to these people?'"

What she said earned her a standing ovation.

AT THE BEGINNING, there was Andrew Jackson Dancy, a young black who, in 1917, left Canton, Miss., headed north. He doesn't remember now just why he stopped off in Memphis, but in a few days he had found a job at the Gayoso Hotel, where he was employed until it closed its doors a few years ago.

In time, he met one of the city's belles, and together they prospered. "My mother and father have always had a fine sense of priorities," Mrs. Hooks said. "In 1929, they contracted to build a brick home on Edith Street, something that few whites were doing that year, much less blacks."

Edith, often referred to as Easy Street in the black community, is a neighborhood of smart bungalows. "Once, I knew everybody on the street. People really looked after each other and nobody's doors and windows wore the bars they do now. I don't think anybody ever locked their doors."

Mrs. Hooks says she grew up surrounded by love and "with a beautiful sense of security." Only one thing marred those early years.

"When I was a teenager, I considered myself the family ugly duckling because I had darker skin than anybody else in the family. That really saddled me with a feeling of inferiority."

It was a thing she says she could never discuss with her lighter-skinned parents and her brother and sister.

"'BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL' was soothing balm for many of us, when it became a catch phrase in the 1960s. It may have straightened out more psyches than anything that's ever happened to blacks. You can't believe how color-conscious my people have been in the past," she says.

Ironically, it was a case of reverse discrimination that helped to square Mrs. Hooks' own color hangup. While a freshman at Howard University in Washington, she was engaged to the son of the vice president of Liberia. "He was as black as night — but no imaginary prince could have been more beautiful."

But as they were making wedding plans, he announced "gently but firmly, that my family could never come to visit us in his country — they were too light-skinned."

"Well, that ripped it," she says. "I wasn't going anywhere my family wasn't welcome."

She says she learned another fact of life from going out with the Liberian student — and still speaks of it with irritation in her voice. "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."

After a year at Howard, she spent a year at Wilberforce (Ohio), before returning to Tennessee to attend Fisk University in Nashville, where she earned her BA in education. (She now holds a master's degree in counseling.)

SHE CAME HOME in 1949 to a postcollege social whirl, and her first teaching job at Barrett's Chapel in the county. But she says that it was Mt. Pisgah School, where she transferred a year-and-a-half later, that opened her eyes to the educational plight of blacks.

"Every morning I went out to a rundown school, where the 'facilities' were down the hill a quarter of a

(Continued on Page 3)

Wife Remembers, Plans Ahead

(Continued from Page 1)

mile away. My first job every day was to make a fire in the potbellied stove.

"Then I would go to the window to watch my kids coming across the fields, often muddy to the knees, so Miss 'Fessa' could teach them something.

"I made up my mind at that point that if they wanted an education that bad, they'd sure get the best I could give."

Her resolve has never faltered. After she married Ben Hooks in 1951 in the new Middle Baptist Church, where he was to become pastor, she applied for a job in the city school system.

She got a flat no. Feeling that the reasoning was discriminatory, she went the political route to gain a teaching position at Carver High School. "My first day, Margaret Williams sniffed at me and said, 'Politics may have gotten you on, but they'll never keep you on.'"

Mrs. Hooks' smile is gently cherubic as she adds, "I'm still on" (the city school system).

SHE SAYS HER courtship and marriage to Ben Hooks meant some real adjustments in philosophy for both. "I was very socially oriented — loved to dance and play bridge. Benny hasn't an antisocial bone in him, but he's always abhorred small talk. He wants conversation with substance.

"My friends used to say, 'Frances, wherever did you find that square? We think he's practicing to be a preacher.'"

Square or not, Frances Dancy was in love with the young attorney who was becoming involved in all the civic organizations to which he was welcomed. "He served as legal adviser to the Black American Legion at the same time Frank Clement was legal adviser to the white American Legion," she says.

"And he never turned down an opportunity to speak. He was all over this state talking to people. As my friends said, he was practicing to be a preacher. I could see myself coming closer and closer to tea parties for the sisters."

But by the time the Lord called Ben Hooks, his wife's faith had strengthened. "I was beginning to learn that the Lord is the best company you can have to get you through the brier patches," she says.

OF THE MANY incidents that were to follow, two stand out still as raw wounds. One, a wound she never expects to heal, is Dr. King's death. The other is the Freedom March at Selma.

She shudders as she remembers. "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," she says. "I have no words to describe it."

Mrs. Hooks says that students at Carver, where she was head of the guidance department, were highly motivated during those difficult years, but they were "ippy" and hard to handle.

"I knew we had to find some new solutions," she says. So, in spite of a bout of poor health, the tiny, dynamic woman worked to set up programs to give the students options they had never had.

She brainstormed the Volunteer Placement Program with Jed Dreifus, and by staying on the trail constantly, they finally saw the program funded. She became its first director, and her efforts saw the recruitment of talented young Memphis blacks by eastern colleges. She also ferreted out job-training alternatives, and perhaps most important, jobs.

NOR DID HER efforts end with a day's work. Her nights were filled with meetings to get recreation and self-help programs for disadvantaged children started. University of Tennessee psychologist Ted May says, "I think Frances served on every advisory group and board of directors in the city designing programs to help young people help themselves."

Even after her husband's FCC appointment, she commuted from Washington to Memphis weekly until she had trained someone to take over her work in volunteer placement.

Last year, she became a commuter again after her mother suffered a series of strokes. "I was staying in Memphis most of the time, so after mother got strong enough to be left a few hours daily, I thought I'd better get to work."

So Frances Hooks got back in harness — this time as a counselor for pregnant girls at one of the high schools.

SHE KNOWS that "Benny's directorship of the NAACP is a mandate to put my Memphis ties on the back of the stove for awhile. He needs me as a confidential secretary," she says.

But even as she begins to make plans for moving to New York, Memphis problems drag at her. "There's so much left to be done. I see only woe for the future, unless attitudes in this city change and job opportunities open up.

"I see signs all about that we are raising up a generation that will be angrier than those young people of the 1960s. For one thing, they are not going to have any patience with the mumbo jumbo of how far we've come — because they feel no personal stake in our first brave steps forward.

"It's time we begin facing up to the fact that if these kids are shortchanged now, they're going to have to be taken care of later, one way or another.

"We have to make up our mind whether it's going to be jail, more welfare — or new economic opportunities."