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Black Leadership at the Crossroads

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African American Archives of Maine

Public Hours

Tuesday: 1:30 p.m.- 4:45 p.m., morning hours by appointment only.

Wednesday: 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; 1:30 p.m.- 4:45 p.m.

Friday: 1:30 p.m.- 4:45 p.m.

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Please note that the African American Archives of Maine are located on the second floor of the Gorham library until the renovations to the Portland library are finished.

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From the Editor's Desk



Maureen Elgersman Lee

Last semester's opening of the "Black Leadership" exhibit was a great success. People traveled from central and southern Maine, and others came from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and even Canada. I thank all who

attended, participated in, and supported this event. One of the most potent statements of the evening was when Gerald Talbot reflected on how his Parker Street neighborhood in Bangor empowered him to be a leader. The tools of leadership, honed in adulthood and eventually taking Talbot to state and national appointments, were forged in the models and lessons of his family and friends. Talbot said sincerely, "my neighborhood gave that to me."

Because February is traditionally celebrated as Black History Month, and because March is Women's History, this is a timely

A PLACE IN TIME

June McKenzie: Leadership at the Crossroads

Born the 10th of 12 children, June McKenzie's life seems to mirror the lessons and experiences of her family. Her father, a Tuskegee graduate whom some might call "a race man," required his children to read Black history in lieu of receiving punishment; her mother, initially a homemaker, also did domestic work. June McKenzie graduated from Portland High School, and took business courses at Northeastern Business School to buttress her education.¹

Having grown up on Anderson Street in Portland, McKenzie reflects proudly on the fact that her parents had always owned their own home. But when June McKenzie's own home was severely damaged by fire in the mid-1960s, her personal experience of racism and her future leadership roles soon intersected. As she sought out temporary housing for herself and her growing family, McKenzie came face-to-face with

discriminatory rental policies. Told that available apartments had been rented out or that a landlord did not rent to Blacks for fear of offending the current tenants, McKenzie found the search for housing difficult. Her experience was transforming, and it is out of this experience that her commitment to activism through the NAACP grew.²

This edition of the *Griot* marks the second installment in the series on Black leadership. One of the fundamental patterns in the activism of Black women is that their leadership often represents a departure from paid labor to unpaid labor; it is voluntary, public sphere work that often starts after the daily demands of work have finished, while those of family continue.

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June McKenzie
Courtesy Shoshana Hoose
Collection, African American
Archives of Maine.

discriminatory rental policies. Told that available apartments had been rented out or that a landlord did not rent to Blacks for fear of offending the current tenants, McKenzie found the search for housing difficult. Her experience was transforming, and it is out of this experience that her commitment to activism through the NAACP grew.²

Over the course of more than 30 years of service to and leadership within the Portland NAACP, June McKenzie held the position of secretary for more than two decades, and subsequently served with distinction on the membership committee and as the chapter's treasurer.

June McKenzie's commitment to another important institution, the church, is evident in the roles she has played as a member of Portland's Green Memorial AME Zion Church, where she has been a member of the choir and of the mission board.³

A Place in Time

Continued from the front

June McKenzie's profile of service may not seem notable to the average reader, but the commitment to leadership while making a living in a society that consistently confined Black women (and men) to the margins of employment is.⁴ Patricia Hill Collins writes in *Black Feminist Thought*,

Prevailing definitions of political activism and resistance misunderstand the meaning of these concepts in Black women's lives. Social research typically focuses on public, official, visible political activity even though unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization may be equally important.⁵

Leadership at the crossroads—where paid labor ends and diverges into voluntary, unpaid labor—is a critical, political choice for change. While relegated to positions as elevator operators, domestics, or factory workers, Black women's decisions to engage in other forms and spheres of labor should not be undermined. History has taught Black men and women that agitation and organization for change could come at great cost to themselves and to the positions they were afforded in the marketplace. One only has to think of how Ida B. Wells was driven out of Tennessee in the 1890s for her stand against lynching or how Fannie Lou Hamer was beaten mercilessly in a Mississippi jail in the 1960s for helping Black citizens to register to vote.⁶

Historically, many Black women have not had the luxury of not engaging in voluntary labor, for their reputation as individuals and as members of the Black community were often at stake. In fact, the motto of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), created in 1896, was "Lifting as We Climb." Led by such middle class figures as Mary Church Terrell, the NACW attempted to improve public opinion of

African American women by raising the position of the lowest. Contrary to popular understanding, however, the creation of the NACW simply represented a coalition of more than 100 local, grassroots women's groups, supported by Black women who had an historical tradition of activism and who already had a keen, personal understanding of their positions in American society.⁷

Patricia Hill Collins explains that Black women have engaged in feminist activism without necessarily being able to articulate philosophical or theoretical bases for their actions. Further, Collins holds the position that a rigid ideological platform for leadership can dismiss the spectrum of Black women's work:

It may be more useful to assess Black women's activism less by the ideological content of individual Black women's belief systems...and more by Black women's collective actions within everyday life that challenge domination in...multifaceted domains.⁸

June McKenzie's position in the Portland area marketplace has changed and advanced well since the 1960s, but she has not departed from the same voluntary work that anchored her more than 30 years ago. In fact, it seems that this commitment has continued to grow beyond the NAACP and Green Memorial, to include work on the Committee to Restore the Abyssinian (Church). Her leadership at the crossroads continues.

Notes

¹ Interview with June McKenzie, 7 May 1992, Portland, Maine, 3; *Anchor of the Soul* Transcript-June McKenzie, Tape 4, 2-3, 5. Shoshana Hoose Collection, African American Archives of Maine (AAAM)

² Interview with June McKenzie and Edith Love, 11 November 1992, Portland, Maine, 2; Interview with June McKenzie, 6-7. Hoose Collection, AAAM.

³ *Anchor of the Soul* Transcript-June McKenzie, Tape 4, 11-14 passim.

⁴ *Anchor of the Soul* Transcript-June McKenzie, Tape 4, 5; Interview with June McKenzie, 3-4.

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2d ed (New York: Routledge, 2000), 202.

⁶ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, 2d ed (New York: William Morrow, 1996), 29, 290.

⁷ Stephanie J. Shaw, "Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women," in *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: A Reader in Black Women's History*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1995), 434-442; Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 167.

⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 203.

Calendar of Events

"If He Hollers, Let Him Go": Dismantling Black Caricature

January 15 through April 15, 2001
Fourth floor, Glickman Family Library,
USM Portland campus
Free and open to the public

An exhibit of photographs, advertisement, and visual objects from the Gerald E. Talbot and Shoshana Hoose Collections of the African American Archives of Maine, exploring a spectrum of Black caricatures and dismantling them with actual representations of African Americans from Maine and across the United States. Call (207) 780-4507 for library hours.

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