



## DOLORES A. HICKERSON

Dolores A. Hickerson, widow of Rev. Charles M. Hickerson, mother of Douglas, Charles, Jr., Tanya and Murphy and grandmother of five, was born in Philadelphia, Pa. and raised in Altoona, Pa.

After graduating from Altoona High School, she received her B.S. Degree in Music Education from Indiana University of Pa. where she and her roommate were the very first black students to live on campus. Due to discriminating hiring practices in Altoona, Pa. and surrounding towns, Mrs. Hickerson moved to Philadelphia where she secured her first music teaching position and did graduate work at Temple University. Her thirty-eight year teaching tenure included, along with Philadelphia, positions in Rochester, N.Y., finally Altoona, Pa. and New Brighton, Pa. where she was a high school and middle school vocal music instructor for approximately twenty-two years, retiring in June, 1992.

Mrs. Hickerson served as organist/choir director at Second Baptist Church, Rochester, Pa. for approximately twenty-three years serving alongside her husband, Rev. Charles M. Hickerson, who pastored there from December, 1968 until his death in July, 1991. She continued to serve the choir and congregation for one year following his death until she relocated to Canonsburg, Pa.

Since leaving the Beaver Valley Area, Mrs. Hickerson served as organist/choir director for a few years at Mt. Olive Baptist Church, Canonsburg, her home church and First Baptist Church, Finleyville, Pa. She continues to play a very active role in the Allegheny Union Baptist Association where she is a past president and advisor of the Ministers' Wives and Widows Ministry, past member and secretary of the Executive Committee and the Trustee Board, member and secretary of the Personnel and Permanent Organization Committees and member of the Board of Directors.

## **MY STORY at IUP**

***Dolores Adams Walker Hickerson***

**(1947-1951)**

At the outset, just let me say that my education and subsequent degree of B.S. in Music Education from the NOW Indiana University of Pa. afforded me a most successful, interesting and fulfilling teaching career. My teaching experience included much cultural diversity, spanning 38 years, grades 6 through 12 in Phila., Pa.; Rochester, N. Y.; Altoona, Pa. and New Brighton, Pa. Early in my career, I had the opportunity to sing professionally with a musical theatre touring company, but thank God, I elected to remain in the teaching field, and I have never regretted that decision.

In pursuit of that education and early employment opportunities, however, I faced and had to deal with much negativity and disappointment due to bias, discrimination and segregation, but like most African-Americans of my generation (I'm now 77 years old), I did not give up. I persevered through tears, frustration and heartache, striving the harder to attain my life's professional goal. My strong family support, Christian background, nurturing self-worth and no-nonsense upbringing afforded great encouragement, motivation and impetus to my journey of preparation for my teaching career.

In the fall of 1947, at the age of 17, having been accepted at the THEN Indiana State Teachers College, I journeyed with my mother, by bus, here

to Indiana, Pa. from my hometown of Altoona, Pa. to officially enroll for the Fall Term. From the Registrar's Office, we were directed to the office of the Dean of Women, Miss Florence Kimball, for my room assignment. During our meeting, Dean Kimball suggested that she felt it unwise for me, an African-American, to live on campus. She advised us that no Negroes had ever lived on campus, and she felt that my social life would be greatly restricted. My mother informed her that I was attending Indiana State Teachers College to get an education, not to have a social life. To further strengthen her position, Dean Kimball called in Dr. Ralph Heiges, the Acting President of Indiana at that time, who told us about Almeda McClelland, a Negro day student from neighboring Blairsville, who

had just completed a successful freshman year as a commuter. He felt that we might want to consider that possibility. He also stressed to us the values of a well-rounded campus life for all students' well-being, and reiterated that I would be limited. My mother and I met all of their negativity with "stalwart resolve," so I was admitted as a resident student.

Unbeknownst to us, another African-American student, Doris Roberts from Meadville, Pa., was also enrolled that day, and subsequently we became roommates and were assigned to a room directly across the hall from Dean Kimball's suite in John Sutton Hall. From that day forward, we felt that we were under extreme scrutiny, and that we had been

assigned to that room deliberately so that Dean Kimball could be aware of our comings and goings, student interactions and relationships. Later, I discovered why Dean Kimball was so adverse to our living on campus. She was the faculty sponsor of the Social Life Comm., the Resident Women's League and the Extra-curricular Activities Comm., so it was her intent to limit us as far as campus life and interpersonal student relationships were concerned. Dean Kimball went so far as to have several meetings with our white friends to try to discourage those friendships. In fact, in the second semester, my roommate's sister enrolled here at Indiana. To avoid an overcrowded room situation, Joanne Hopkins, one of our white friends, requested me as her roommate, so the sisters could room together.

Dean Kimball flatly refused to allow it. She put another cot into our room to accommodate a third person. Yes, Dean Kimball handed us nothing but lemons; however, Praise Be To God, we knew how to make lemonade.

Doris and I were both music majors, and we made friends in and out of our department. During my college years, I was Secretary of the Sophomore Class, a town church soloist as well as soloist with the college Concert Choir, Travel Chorus, Mellowmen and Swing Out. For the most part, the faculty and the student body treated us as regular students and peers. Professor Charles Davis and his wife (affectionately known as Mr. D and Tweed) endeared themselves to us by welcoming us into



their hearts and into their home. They made us feel wanted and cared for, and, God knows, we needed that.

Naturally, we did not "cross the line" to date our fellow students, no matter how close a relationship we developed. I even sang "Love Duets" with tenor, Frank Puleo, but we never had coffee "as a couple." There were three white students, who became our closest friends and those friendships have lasted a lifetime. Together, Janet Kaufman, Peggy McCluskie, Joanne Hopkins, Doris and I, WE "5", became known as "The Motley Crew." These students knew more about our "racial discrimination" occurrences than the entire student body. They were with us when we went into the

Dairy Dell in downtown Indiana and received the note in the menu, stating, "We do not serve Negroes." They sat with us on our weekly Saturday "sit-ins" in that same restaurant until the Saturday when no note appeared in the menu. By then we were boldly taking doughnuts to eat during our "sit-ins." However on that day, we ordered food but were afraid to eat it, so we paid the bill and left. Later, we were surprised to learn that the President of the college, Dr. Willis E. Pratt, had threatened to declare that restaurant "off limits" to all collegians unless we were served. Our mission was accomplished.

When we first went to the movies, the ushers would not seat Doris and me on the first floor. They

directed us to the balcony. Doris was not too much concerned because she said she faced that treatment in Meadville, her hometown. I, however, very disturbed about it, complied two or three times; then, I decided I was not going to sit in the balcony anymore. The manager told me I could not be seated on the first floor, but I could stand in the back. So I stood in the back; then, I would sit in one of the back seats when the ushers were busy. Soon they just let me sit back there. I was never offensive, but I did tell them that if I couldn't choose my own seat, I shouldn't have to pay full price. When our white friends were with us they did whatever we had to do. They would not be seated anywhere if we could not be seated. I know they helped us open many doors such as the local roller

skating rink, for example. I know that they helped change many minds and hearts, among our peers, from rejection to acceptance of us.

However, there were some major happenings on campus that we just did not pursue, because we knew we would not be accepted or judged on our qualifications...only by the color of our skin. We could not pledge sororities, audition for most play casts, attend escorted dances and proms and the like. Two of our white friends pledged Pi Kappa Sigma and tried to get the sorority to accept me for membership, but they were told they would lose their charter. Joanne and Peggy were so disappointed that they lost interest in the organization. These girls were our true friends.

As students we were told we could not go outside the city limits. I was a church soloist at a couple of white churches for the 8:00 morning services. For the 11:00 service, however, Doris and I wanted to worship and serve in a black church. That meant we had to go to Chevy Chase, the all-black community, which was an extension of 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Indiana. It seemed definitely outside the city limits, but we were afraid to ask permission for fear we would be denied. So when the weather permitted we just walked and went.

We were befriended there by Mrs. Velma Matthews and her family, and we would go to church, have a good chicken, greens and cornbread dinner; then hurry back to the campus to sign in before the

deadline hour. It was quite a long walk, but we could not accept any rides because we were not allowed in cars. We really looked forward to those Sundays when we could go to the St. James A.M.E. Church in Chevy Chase. The members were so kind and loving to us and, being away from home sometimes facing daily racial challenges, we needed that support.

In our junior and senior years in college, we were housed in Clark Hall, the dormitory for upperclassmen. What a blessed change that was. There we did not feel under constant surveillance. In the words of the old Negro spiritual, we felt, "Free at last; free at last; Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!!" But for me, the discrimination

and segregation presented more challenges.

Because I was a Negro, I was denied permission to do my semester of student teaching in Altoona, Pa., my hometown. As a result, that year Indiana would not permit any of its student teachers to accept assignments in Altoona. I was assigned to the Laboratory School and High School in Indiana.

Following graduation in 1951, even the highest recommendation in student teaching couldn't qualify me for a position in Altoona or surrounding towns because of my race. I filed a formal Unfair Hiring Practices Complaint with the Pa. State Human Relations Commission in Harrisburg with no immediate results. In the interim, I took a job as a clicker operator at Puritan Knitting Mills in Altoona

and gave private voice lessons for a time; then, I moved to Phila. and was hired in the Phila. Public Schools. Regarding my Unfair Hiring Practices Complaint, the State Human Relations Commission, due to politics or whatever, "dropped the ball" and never issued a ruling. But, personally, I was determined to override that unfair rejection and 14 years later, I was hired in Altoona, Pa. as a Public School Vocal Music Instructor. If that ruling had been issued in my favor, I often wonder what the payoff would have been, retroactively.

Here at Indiana, Doris and I did what we could, each of us in our own way, to keep ourselves emotionally healthy and positive, so that we could physically and mentally meet the challenges we had



to overcome, not only for ourselves, but for those who would follow us. Doris Roberts, my college roommate, is now deceased, but when I shared with her at our 50<sup>th</sup> college reunion in 2001, she seemed to have forgotten so much of the inner pain we felt as a result of the discrimination and segregation we experienced here in Indiana. I certainly am not bitter, but I have not forgotten. That may have been because I could not accept unfair rejection and abuse without question. If only to let the perpetrator know that it was unfair, I had to speak out and register, with respect, my grievances.

However, I feel honored to have been a soldier on the Road to Equality for my race. I truly feel that

we, as young college students, were worthy pioneers, because, despite the injustices we had to endure, we proudly walked tall as African-American young women, conscious of the fact that, in our attitudes and actions, we were not only responsible to ourselves, but to our rich racial heritage. How we handled ourselves in the midst of that injustice spoke to "who we are as a people." As pioneers, it was important that we represent our race well in college and later in the classroom, and I feel that history will record that we did that.

"Stony the road we trod, bitter the chast'ning rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?"

We have come over a way that with tears has been  
watered,  
We have come, treading our path thro' the blood of  
the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.