

Dorothy Hodge Johnson (1916-2004)

Memorial Service

Tuesday, July 13, 2004

You are the last of the faithful witnesses to the lives of Dorothy Johnson and the two men, Dowdal Davis and Herman Johnson, she made great. Each of us in this room probably knows how powerful the influence of a woman like Dorothy can be in the life of an unworthy, marginally capable man. Think of what she could do with talented people like Dowdal Davis and Herman Johnson. We are not likely to have public occasions to talk about these remarkable people after today.



We are especially sad to be here today, so soon after the death of Dorothy's husband, Herman, in February of this year.

Dorothy's long dying, begun in the spring of last year, was interrupted to ensure first that Herman recovered from his illness if possible and second that his death was treated respectfully in every way.

In Herman's last days, she held on, conducting herself and her affairs with intelligence and dignity, even though she knew then of her impending death. In a determined manner, she set Herman's affairs in order, then her own, and died last week. Before dying, she made sure that his estate and hers were devoted through the Herman and Dorothy H Johnson Trust to the education of needful African American men and women.

She was blessed that Tara joined her, and cared for her; when Herman became ill she stayed with Dorothy until the end.

Herman was praised in all particulars not so long ago by many speaking today. Each of you and those on this platform recognized the exceptional force and effect of these two people, Dorothy and Herman, acting in concert.

When Herman Johnson came to Kansas City in the late 1950's, he already had a distinguished record of leadership in the armed forces, in education, and business. That record was enlarged by Dorothy. He and Dorothy made a wonderful combination, unique in our town. Her undisputed leadership on several fronts – civil rights, mental health, welfare reform – complemented Herman's efforts on comparable initiatives for social justice in Kansas City, Jefferson City, and Washington.

She and Herman, in due course, were among the founders of the Local Investment Commission in 1991. Dorothy remained a close observer of LINC's work, and a quiet and steady counsel to Gayle Hobbs, LINC's Executive Officer, and to LINC commissioners.

But today, Dorothy alone is to be held up for our respect, expressions of our affection, and farewell.

Dorothy came from the Hodge family, which is distinguished for its community commitment and service. Academically precocious, with various honors and awards in journalism, Dorothy was the first black woman elected to Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Kansas. She had worked in the summers for *The Call*. That made her job there, after graduation in 1937, almost inevitable.

We take for granted today the important role of the black press in the 30's, 40's and 50's. The work of *The Call* throughout the southwest was especially significant. Dorothy joined the paper at a critical time in black history – consciousness raising, setting the record straight, and making sure events of the black community were recognized and recorded – in the run up to World War II, during the War itself, and in the changes the War brought about revealed in the Civil Rights reform of the 50's and 60's. Dorothy, as a professional journalist, witnessed, recorded, and reflected on all these happenings. She played her part in instigating these happenings.

Most of you know of her role in the protests of the 50's, but it was her work, her life as a journalist, that shaped the inquiring, listening, reflecting mind we came to depend on and now we miss.

Her wide reading and knowledge, tested in the marketplace of ideas and practice, gave her opinions, unusual, lasting credibility, and influence.

She met her first husband, Dowdal Davis, at K.U., where both were involved in student efforts to abolish racial segregation and exclusion on campus. He was the first of the two remarkable men she brought along. They married after she graduated from Kansas University. Later he became General Manager and Editor of *The Call*. His work at *The Call* and the President of the Association of Black Newspapers set him apart as a leader in black journalism. Late in the war, President Truman sent a delegation, including Dowdal Davis, to Europe to see how black soldiers were doing. This delegation was sent back a second time, led by Davis, and returned with detailed recommendations which were presented to the President. Executive Order 9981, desegregating the armed forces, was the result.

When he died unexpectedly in 1957, she was 41. She returned to Kansas University for her Master's Degree in social work. Her graduate thesis was based on her own experience, with many others, integrating Kansas City department store eating facilities in the 50's. Her thesis emphasized the work and results of social action organizations, spontaneously activated by ordinary citizens in Kansas City to address social injustice and hardship. In due course, she returned to K.U. and M.U. to teach in the Schools of Social Work and Medicine.

Her work with LINC may be seen as an outgrowth, a powerful realization of Dorothy's master's thesis analyzing and endorsing "bottoms up" citizens' organization and citizens' governance of social and civic reform. We are grateful to Gayle Hobbs and the staff of LINC for helping Tara organize this beautiful memorial event.

Dorothy's career in social action and social service covered many causes. You have heard of many of those today from Flora Anderson and Barbara Haar. Several of her experiences in social work, leadership, and management reflected her special concern for young black women, especially the daughters of black single parent heads of households. She was serving as the chief executive of the Florence Crittenden Home for unmarried mothers when Dowdal Davis died. Our aging and forgotten seniors were also her concern.

It was an exciting half century – because of her combination of professional training and social service, she was involved in almost every significant social service and civil rights initiative in Kansas City from the late 40's well into the 80's. There are few among us today who can claim such a record.

And, yet, she sometimes spoke of the burden, as one friend put it, "of being called on to be held up", of being called on by a white community needing help and not knowing where to turn. Such are the trials of those who cross boundaries and bring strangers together.

How does one person represent ethical standards for public life, for civic work? Many of you turned to her with this question: "Is this situation as rotten as I think it is?"

As she answered this question, her experiences in journalism helped her tell the phony from the authentic.

Her answers were based on her capacity to see what was behind the façade, to relate the current scene, whatever it was, to the black history of Kansas City, to know the players and the hidden or private agenda behind the public act, and to know its impact on her community, on our community – all these qualities made her unique.

Her sense of ethics in individuals was never compromised. When, as she warned, we are so involved with other people that we silence ourselves, that we go along, that we compromise ourselves, we have to "watch out". At the point where politics, civics, and business are joined with the self-interest of those in the black and white community who are in charge, she was especially alert. Laura's reminiscence about Dorothy's lunch at the White House in 1964 captured her wit and modesty in the face of the powerful.

She was not a "hireling", as the gospel reader warned us about this morning. She was unself-interested. Rather she was committed to the engagement of the competent and the caring to the hard jobs of this community. Father Shepherd praised her in his homily with those words: "She stayed on the side of the road with those in need; she did not cross to the other side".

Many of you have seen the film in the Visitors' Center at the Museums at 18th and Vine. To many visitors, this film is especially informative as it presents the history of the neighborhood of the 18th and Vine in the context of civil rights activities in the 50's and 60's. As a witness and instigator, Dorothy appears in the film. Those of you who want a feeling for her personality and her manner will enjoy seeing her there. In that film, she speaks directly on the evils of segregation and its effects on its practitioners and its victims. She tells the viewers, "you are not to be blamed for it, but you are to be blamed if you don't do something about it".

Laura's recovery of and reading from Dorothy's letter to *The Star* about equality and racial justice also fit very well with her belief and the beliefs of many of you that even the least of us may do great things. This morning the Bible reading's at the service for Dorothy at St. Augustine's reminded us "we do not yet know what we shall be", (1 John). The potential in each of us is thus expectant and unfulfilled.

One of you asked in her last days, what will we do without her? Who will take her place?

When she talked to you, you may have felt, as many did, that she was coaching you; preparing you to go on, to carry on. Buck O'Neil could not be here, but because he honored Dorothy, he permitted this story. Buck came to Kansas City in 1938 – a young ball player. On one of the first Saturday nights with the team in Kansas City he was in the Blue Room where he met Mrs. Bluford and Dorothy. They told him it was "very fast down here". A lady of pleasure took a special interest in Buck, offering to buy him some new clothes. Dorothy took him aside "don't go that way". He was in church the next day with Dorothy and Lucile Bluford and then to the ballgame. Speaking of Dorothy's influence, Buck said, "She stayed with me".

She was described in a national award as "the beautiful activist". The beautiful activist -- she stays with us all. She coaches us all and we love her for that.

It is a sense of community, of fellowship, in the largest possible sense, toward which Dorothy moved and pushed us. We are involved, each of us, in her community, and she depends on each of us to continue, if not finish, the work – in all its aspects – to which she was devoted.

Work done together, in her spirit, and that of her fellow activists – the dead, the living, and the yet-to-be-here – is our common task. There is no one to take her place, only all of us.

Amen.

Landon H. Rowland