



Dorothy Height learned about discrimination at a very young age.

As a straight-A student, with a scholarship to support her university education, she was invited to interview at Barnard College. She could hardly wait to get there, and her train (which was twenty minutes behind schedule) made her late.

As it happened, the lateness of the interview did not matter. Things would not go well for Dorothy that day, despite Barnard's invitation.

In her book, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, she tells us what went wrong:

When I arrived, breathless, in the office of the dean, I was asked to have a seat. It seemed an eternity before the dean finally came to speak to me. I apologized for being late. It didn't matter, she said. Although I had been accepted, they could not admit me.

It took me a while to realize that their decision was a racial matter: Barnard had a quota of two Negro students per year, and two others had already taken the spots. "You are young enough to wait for next year," said the dean, meaning, I suppose, to be encouraging.

*But I couldn't believe my ears. I was devastated. Since childhood, school had been my love, my life. I wanted to get on with it. I pleaded with her, but she was adamant. Rules were rules, and two young women named Belle Tobias and Vera Joseph were holding the only two precious places for Negro woman in Barnard's class of 1933. (Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, page 31.)*

Dorothy Height did "get on with it," but not at Barnard.

She was accepted, on the spot, at New York University. Providing the letter from Barnard's dean, Height met with NYU's Dean Schaeffer:

I'll never forget her eyes as she looked up. She said, "A girl who makes these kinds of grades doesn't need an application to enroll at NYU." (Height, page 32.)

Dorothy blossomed at NYU. As she noted, later in life:

...I can bear witness to the potential over a life experience. Barnard College did not let me in, but New York University welcomed me. (Height, page 296.)

Mari Evans wrote a poem about Height. It is quoted in Maya Angelou's Foreword of *Open Wide The Freedom Gates*:

I
am a black woman
tall as a cypress
strong
beyond all definition still
defying place
and time
and circumstance
assailed
impervious
indestructible
Look
on me and be
renewed.

(Evans, quoted in *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, page xi.)

Seventy-five years after she was turned away from Barnard - and after a lifetime of service to others as a psychologist, social worker and respected voice of the civil rights movement - Dr. Dorothy Height was welcomed to Barnard as an "honorary alumna."

She had already received the institution's highest honor, twenty years previously, as noted by Barnard's President, Judith Shapiro:

More than two decades ago, Dr. Height accepted the college's highest honor, the Barnard Medal of Distinction . . . This was a gracious and forgiving gesture on her part and one for which we are most appreciative. (Jet Magazine, Jun 21, 2004, page 9.)

Dr. Height was the president of the National Council of Negro Women for forty years. In 2004, she also received the Congressional Gold Medal for her lifetime of leadership and achievements.

She was always known as a great speaker, and even when she faced discrimination, she persevered.

Growing up in Pennsylvania, she won several speech contests at Rankin High School. As a finalist, she was entitled to compete in the state oratory contest in Harrisburg, the state's capital.

Excited, the teenager drove to the finals with her Latin teacher. However, she faced a humiliating situation when she arrived at the hotel where the finals were taking place:

It was hard to keep her head high when she was stopped at the door of the hotel where the contest was being held. It never occurred to them that Dorothy had come as a contest entrant. They took one look at the black child who stood before them and dismissed her without taking the time to ask why she'd come.

But Dorothy was there to speak her piece in front of the contest judges. She went back out to the car and changed into the special dress her mother had hung there for her. Then, despite the disrespect she'd faced, she went right into the contest.

Dorothy was the only black participant. And she was the last entrant to speak. All the judges were white. Still, she gave a rousing speech about the importance of peace among people. Then she added a special message to her speech. She recounted the story of Jesus' birth and told everyone that just as Mary and Joseph could not get into the inn on that special night, she, too, had been shunned by the people at the hotel - but she was denied because of her skin color.

The contest judges awarded Dorothy first prize. (Let it Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters, by Andrea Davis Pinkney and illustrated by Stephen Alcorn, pages 62-63.)

Dr. Height fought for freedom and equality her entire life. She was at Dr. King's side, when he delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, and she died - aged 98 - on April 20, 2010.

Credits:

Quoted passages from Dr. Height's memoir, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*.

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See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Dorothy-Height-Civil-Rights-Leader-0>

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