

Dharathula “Dolly” Hood Millender: The Joy of Giving Service

By Crystal M. Reynolds, Ph.D.

Background/Early Years

Named the “official historian” of Gary, Indiana in 2010, Dharathula or “Dolly” as she has been referred to for most of her life was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on February 4, 1920, a year that marked the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, the beginning of prohibition in the United States, and the year that women were granted the right to vote.

Dolly Millender was raised on the south east side of the city. One of eight children, Dolly often describes her childhood as very happy. Her parents, the late Daisy E. Hood and Orestes Hood, were very active in the Terre Haute community.

Her mother, Daisy Hood, was an early civil rights activist in Terre Haute often referred to as a “visionary”. Educated at Fisk University in the early 1900s and earning a teaching degree, Daisy Hood was very active in the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and served as the State Secretary of NAACP Branches for many years.

This early civil rights leader was one of the founders of the Phyllis Wheatley Association in Terre Haute, an organization that established the Phyllis Wheatley House in Terre Haute, which provided housing and services to black women and later provided much needed housing for black women students at Indiana State Normal School (1924-1945). Mrs. Hood, who also co-founded the Colored Waif’s Home for Orphans in Terre Haute, was a leading force in the establishment of both the Charles T. Hyde Community Center (1942) and the Colored Day Nursery (1908 to 1966).

Dolly’s father, Orestes Hood, was a graduate of Martinsville High School in Martinsville, IN, and completed the two-year teacher’s course of study in electricity from Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. He became a teacher in the East St. Louis Public Schools. Later, the Hood family settled in Terre Haute, at a period when many African Americans throughout the nation were being systematically denied basic rights. Mr. Hood, however, owned and operated the only radio shop, Hood’s Radio Service, in the 500 block of Ohio Street in downtown Terre Haute. He had a classical music radio program featuring Victor classical records, and was the agent for the Fada radio console. Mr. Hood had a staff of one repairman he trained, and built a first radio that he shared with the community. He also put in the inter-communications system at Sarah Scott Junior High School. After the depression years, Mr. Hood would become the first African American professional staff member at Purdue University where he repaired or rebuilt audio-visual equipment in the Michael Golden Shops. Her father was clearly a man ahead of his time.

The Hoods wanted the best for their children, and Dolly Millender would not disappoint them, earning her bachelor's degree with a major in English and minors in music and library science at Indiana State Teacher's College in 1941. Her siblings also would attend Indiana State, and achieve much professional success throughout their lives, and serve their communities in various leadership capacities.

Indiana State Teacher's College Years

After attending Booker T. Washington Elementary School under the leadership of the beloved educator Charles T. Hyte, Millender attended Woodrow Wilson Junior High, the first to integrate the school in the early 1930s, and attended Wiley High School in Terre Haute, graduating in 1937. Millender then attended Indiana State Teacher's College from 1937 to 1941, following in the footsteps of her father's sisters, Josephine and Jessie Hood, who both earned teaching degrees from Indiana State Normal School (ISNS). Several of the other Hood relatives who attended Indiana State were two of Dolly's brothers and three of her sisters. Dolly received a first class education from the School. Most of the teachers at the School were fair and kind to her during her tenure there. Perhaps credit for her kind treatment could be given in part due to the fact that her father repaired most of her professors' radios. A working radio, of course, was a necessity during that time period when it was the primary means of communication with the outside world.

While Indiana State was open to all regardless of race, there were still some areas that were not open to all students. Millender and some of her fellow black classmates ate their meals at a small restaurant opened by a local African American couple who provided meals to the black college students. However, it would be a courageous act by Millender's brother, Orestes Jr., that would begin to dismantle the "no colored" rule at the school's lunch counter. Prior to Orestes' stance, black students could order a sandwich at the lunch counter, but they could not eat it in the facility. It was carryout only for them at that time.

Orestes Jr. waged a one-man sit-in at the school lunch facility for several days. Eventually, her brother's persistence and tenacity paid off. The College opened the lunch counter to all.

In addition to the cafeteria practices, black students had to reside off campus either at the Phyllis Wheatley House (girls only) or at clubs or private residences due to the segregated customs of the time. Millender was fortunate to reside at her comfortable home on South 14th Street. Purple grapes, apples, and rhubarb were abundant in her backyard as a child. And, she spent many days playing with her friends in the yard.

During the years that Dolly was a student at Indiana State, white national social fraternities and sororities were not open to black students. However, there were other organizations that opened their doors to all, regardless of race. One such organization was the Student Council of which Dolly was an active member in 1940-41. As a member of the Student Council, she was responsible for establishing senior traditions and rules for freshmen. She served on the Council

with fellow classmate and future Tuskegee Airman Quentin Smith. Part of the bylaws of the constitution of the Student Council called for a “colored” (African American) student to be on the Council.

Career Path/Achievements

While at Indiana State, Dolly took her mother’s advice and got everything she could out of her four years at the College. After graduating from Indiana State with a Bachelor of Science degree, Dolly went on to have much success in her professional life. Serving as a librarian at various libraries, including a junior college in South Carolina, the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., and in various school libraries, she brought her immense experience to Gary, Indiana in 1960 as the Pulaski School Librarian until her retirement from active library work in 1978.

In addition to her role as a school librarian, Dolly was very active in the Gary community serving as a library board trustee (1960s and 1970s); a Gary City councilwoman (1980-1992); a school board member (1992-2004); a Lutheran Church missionary team member (30 years); and the founder and CEO of the Gary Historical and Cultural Society, Inc. (GHCS) (1976-present).

This author of five books, 2 of which are on the history and culture of Gary, Indiana, also received her Master of Science degree in 1968 in Educational Media from Purdue University.

Dolly is the Recipient of the Gary Steel City Hall of Fame Award, The Governor’s Award (Governor Mitch Daniels) for Outstanding Historic Preservation in Indiana, and the proclamation as Gary’s Official Historian. As a Renaissance woman, with the aid of her daughter Naomi Millender, through GHCS, she sponsors the Free Saturday School for the Arts and Science and the Summer Enrichment for Learning Program for Gary children, and the Gary Civic Symphony Orchestra, as well as other cultural programs in Gary. For nearly three decades, Dolly’s “mission” has been maintaining the City of Gary’s first building as a city treasure, an historic museum and visitor’s center. She presently oversees the current plans to raise funds and seek support to revitalize and expand this important national historic landmark.

Family/Passing the Torch

Dolly and her late husband Justyn, a professional printer at the *Washington Post* newspaper and the United States Printing Office, are the parents of two children, Justine and Naomi Millender. Both children have continued in the tradition of personal achievement and service to others, a precedent set by both Dolly Millender and her forward thinking parents, Daisy and Orestes Hood.

Justine attended historically black Langston University in Oklahoma, earning an education degree. She recently retired as an outstanding teacher in the Chicago Public Schools, and is currently involved in GHCS programs. Dolly’s other daughter, Naomi, who attended Indiana

State University from 1963 to 1967, received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Radio/TV/Film in 1967, and was the principal cellist in ISU's symphony orchestra. Achieving the rank of a first chair in the University's symphony orchestra was a significant achievement for an African American at this time in both our nation's and the College's history. Naomi, who attended the prestigious Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore at the tender age of 13, is the founding member and principal cellist and manager of the Gary Civic Symphony Orchestra, as well as director of GHCS programs. She is a retired college educator and directed Follow Through Educational Projects in three states, using a culture-based educational model, which was sponsored by Northeastern Illinois University.

Like her mother and grandmother before her, Naomi continued working with the NAACP. Naomi was instrumental in getting the student chapter of the NAACP established on campus and in ensuring its future success. She served as president of the student chapter in 1967, and showed tremendous leadership when confronted with a potentially explosive situation. When a white campus fraternity chose to perform its skit in the annual Campus Revue in Black Face as had been the custom at the College, the NAACP, under the leadership of Naomi, spoke out against this practice causing the fraternity to veer from the usual practice.

In addition to helping her grandmother, Daisy Hood, print and mail the NAACP newsletter throughout the state, Naomi also started a tutoring program for African American children in the Terre Haute city schools. At a local NAACP meeting one day, Naomi learned that many of the Black children in the local schools were well behind their white counterparts. Naomi was asked by members at the meeting to organize Indiana State's black students to provide tutoring services at the Hyte Community Center. Naomi organized the tutoring program, which eventually partnered with the campus Methodist organization. This partnership proved successful, and the program would remain in effect for many years after her departure from ISU.

In keeping with Daisy Hood's tradition of excellence and service to community, Dolly and her daughter Naomi Millender are two Indiana State University women who have achieved so much in their lifetime and have continued to stay true to their mission as stated in Dolly Millender's motto: "The joy of living is the joy of giving service to others." At 93 years young, Dolly Millender is a true Sycamore.

Information from this essay taken from the January 27, 2011 and July 29-31, 2013 interviews of the author with Dolly Millender and Naomi Millender and additional facts provided by Naomi Millender on August 1, 2013, and from The History of the African American Student Experience at Indiana State University 1870-1972 (Crystal M. Reynolds, Ph. D., 2012, self published). Biography edited by Ms. Naomi Millender and Dr. Nancy Latta.

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