



IN MEMORIAM

The week just past has brought news of the passing from the scene of two noted figures, each much deserving of recognition in the story of true achievement in America's arduous route to the good society. Such news, as with any death, is sobering, but today it is at once celebratory, since the deceased each had completed the trajectory of a luminous career in service to their fellows. Of each the happy memory persists among those of us remaining in the land of the living, and their examples point rigorously toward the most worthy goals in our own strivings.

DOROTHY HEIGHT

From the time of her youth in the 1920s, when in her high school in Pennsylvania she met with a long train of slights, culminating when she had won a public speaking contest carrying the award of a scholarship to the famous Barnard University in New York City, only to be rebuffed at the college gates because the school had already admitted two African American students, the yearly quota, Dorothy Height, resilient, smart, and inspired, promptly earned an undergraduate and Master's Degree from the more hospitable New York University. She then set about reconstructing a perverse social world, and in the quest, which lasted in full vigor through the first decade of the next century, that is, our own age, she worked shoulder to shoulder with the greats among the courageous pioneers who envisioned a just society and who strove dramatically to lay the new foundations of its architecture. As a young intern in New York, she found herself hosting Eleanor Roosevelt when that excellent lady, having parked on a nearby street, came to visit the community center where the twenty-something Ms. Height was working. The dialogue between Ms. Height and Ms. Roosevelt, one of genuine and heartfelt interchange, both personal and intellectual and at all events intensely practical, continued for the next nearly three decades, ending only with Ms. Roosevelt's death, in 1965. As the years followed, she found herself in the inner circles of the cause coalescing about its most famous leader, Martin Luther King, contributing a massive quota of wisdom and energy to the movement whose effect was nothing less than a broad transformation of the moral and legal standards of American society.

Dialogue on Diversity presented its Lifetime Achievement Award to Dorothy Height at the Public Policy Forum in 2007. In her presence, listening to her narrative, one might sense the startling vitality of figures – Ms. Roosevelt, the Rev. King, and a train of others – whom we had known as names in history books, and perhaps little more. Ms. Height died at the age of 98, having undimmed eye and the battling spirit of old – she was in the midst of a campaign to save a tennis court for its wonted use by neighborhood children.

JAIME ESCALANTE

In the most challenging of settings, that of an urban high school, all planning, and all efforts are called upon to wrest from often unruly scholars a few valued moments of attention and some modicum of achievement. Jaime Escalante, a humble mathematics teacher in the Los Angeles Schools, managed to bring around an unpromising crew to a string of scintillating achievements in the arcane worlds of mathematics, and to institutionalize the achievement as he fashioned a school mathematics department that continued to produce proficiency in this not terribly sexy science. How did he do it? It was a mix of definable exhortation and defined steps in the intellectual journey, which are reproducible by others elsewhere, and of sheer charm and charisma, which are less so. The story received a real world cinematic twist when the authorities in the school system concluded that the students, scoring remarkably high on calculus tests, must have been cheating. The scores were genuine, and it was the school board and the administrators who were forced grumpily to concede the fact. The cinematic twist did in fact become a movie, and Mr. Escalante's achievements and the stratospheric academic feats of his charges were celebrated around the county. The episode was not only a healthy assertion of the virtues of the underdogs, but a prod to the latent sentiments of civic-minded citizens far and wide, who began to ask whether the educational torpor that they saw on all sides was decreed by a malign providence or was remediable in the hands of a nationally based movement for educational excellence. Mr. Escalante's best memorial would be not a recollection of him as a skilled and dramatically satisfying figure, but as the perennial standard against which the revival of serious learning is to be gauged.