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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Dorothy M. Hamm

Led Arlington Schools Desegregation



By Yvonne Shinhoster Lamb

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Dorothy M. Bigelow Hamm, 85, a civil rights activist who was a leader in the federal desegregation suit that led in 1959 to the peaceful integration of public schools in Arlington, died of congestive heart failure May 14 at Henrico Doctors' Hospital in Richmond.

She lived in Lake Caroline, Va.

For more than 50 years, Mrs. Hamm advocated for equal rights for blacks in Virginia. She also served for two decades as an elections officer in Arlington County.

She initiated and taught in a Head Start program there in the mid-1960s to early 1970s. As a retired federal government administrative assistant, she gave voice to her civic and church passions through poetry and plays.

A month after the Supreme Court declared in its *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that segregated schools were unequal and therefore illegal, an integrated group of Arlington residents began working to break down Virginia's declared policy of "massive resistance" to school desegregation. Mrs. Hamm was one of the plaintiffs in the successful civil suit that was filed in May 1956.

Three years later, after much legal wrangling and many political obstacles, four 12-year-old black students made history by entering Stratford Junior High School. The school was said to be the first in Virginia to desegregate.

In an article published in *The Washington Post* in 1996, Mrs. Hamm said that the *Brown* decision alone did not motivate the Arlington residents. "It's something we felt should have been done years prior to that, but when that decision came out, it gave us the impetus to move ahead," she said.

Mrs. Hamm was determined that her three children would not be denied admission to schools or any other public facilities because of the color of their skin, said her daughter, Carmela M. Hamm of Richmond.

"My mother told me that the reason she decided to fight so vigorously was that my brother would pass by Stratford Junior High and say something about going to that school. And she told him it was for white boys, and he said, 'I wish I was a white boy,' " Carmela Hamm recounted. Mrs. Hamm's son, Edward, entered Stratford seven months after the first black students were admitted.

In addition to the school desegregation suit that was filed by the NAACP, Mrs. Hamm joined in legal actions to eliminate the discriminatory pupil placement form and to desegregate athletics in Arlington public schools.

She was a part of court actions that resulted in the desegregation of Arlington theaters, following her arrests in 1963 with others for picketing, and that eliminated the poll tax and removed the race designation from public forms and voting records.

Her civil rights activities spanned decades and included marching with the Coalition on Racial Equality, meeting Martin Luther King Jr. and participating in the 1963 March on Washington and joining in the Poor People's March on Washington in 1968.

In 2002, the Virginia legislature acknowledged Mrs. Hamm in a House joint resolution, citing her lifetime achievements and exemplary dedication to the cause of equal rights for all Virginians.

Dorothy M. Bigelow was born in Caroline County, Va., and grew up in a three-room tin house in Fairfax County.

In later years, she traveled from her home to Washington to attend school. She graduated from Armstrong High School, attended Miner Teachers College and Cortez Peters Business School and George Washington University.

In the early 1940s, she began working as a file clerk for the Veterans Administration. She later joined the Pentagon and the Treasury Department's Bureau of Engraving as an administrative assistant doing clerical work. Her final government position was with the Defense Department's Surgeon General's Office, from which she retired in 1963.

She served for more than 27 years as an officer of elections in Arlington County. Her political roles included being a delegate to the county and state Democratic conventions in 1964; one of the first African Americans elected to a political party to represent the Woodlawn precinct; Arlington County assistant registrar; Arlington chief election officer in the Woodlawn precinct for 14 years; and chairwoman of community voter registration drives.

In 1976, one of her plays, "Our Heritage: Slavery to Freedom 1776-1976," was designated an official bicentennial event by Arlington County. Another one, in 1984, "Our Struggle for Equality -- 25 Years Ago," was broadcast on Arlington Cable TV Channel 31 and has been televised annually in conjunction with the celebration of Black History Month.

Mrs. Hamm also wrote and produced the play "A Woman Called Moses," which chronicled the life of Harriet Tubman. The play was later presented at the 1985 Northern Virginia Folk Festival at Thomas Jefferson Theater.

Mrs. Hamm lived in Fairfax and Arlington counties and returned to Caroline County in 1987.

No matter where she lived, Mrs. Hamm was involved in leadership roles in the three churches she attended over the years. Since 1987, she had served at Wright's Chapel United Methodist Church as secretary, trustee and in the drama group. She wrote and produced two plays at Wright's Chapel.

She received many awards and honors over the years, including the first Arlington County Martin Luther King Jr. Award for Outstanding Volunteer Service in 1982 and a certificate of appreciation by the Young Arlington Democrats for "Pioneering Civil Rights in Arlington."

Two years ago, Mrs. Hamm wrote a book titled "Integration of Arlington County Schools: My Story." At the time of her death, she was working with her daughter on a documentary about the life of noted civil rights attorney Oliver W. Hill and the integration of Arlington schools.

In addition to her daughter, survivors include her husband of 62 years, Edward Leslie Hamm Sr. of Lake Caroline; two sons, Edward Leslie "Sonny" Hamm of Virginia Beach and Bernard C. Hamm Sr. of Arlington; a sister, Melba "Jenny" Clarke, and a brother, Leroy "Booster" Bigelow, both of Falls Church; four grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Dorothy M. Hamm, left, talks with Barbara Marx, whose mother participated with Hamm in the school-desegregation lawsuit.