

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Gloria Hayes Richardson Dandridge

(May 6, 1922 – July 15, 2021)

“First Black Woman to Lead a Grassroots Civil Rights Organization Outside the Deep South”

Gloria Hayes Richardson was born Gloria St. Clair Hayes on May 6, 1922 in Baltimore, Maryland. During the Great Depression, her family moved to Cambridge, Maryland, where her maternal grandfather, Herbert M. St. Clair was one of the town's wealthiest citizens, and the only black member of the Cambridge City Council.

Gloria was sixteen years old when she enrolled in Howard University. She graduated with a degree in Sociology in 1942 and worked for the federal government during WWII, in Washington, DC. Despite her education and her grandfather's influence, Gloria couldn't land a job as no agencies would hire a black social worker. Gloria went on to marry her first husband in 1948, and raised her family for the next thirteen years. When Freedom Riders arrived in Cambridge in 1961, the segregated town had a 40% unemployment rate for black people. Gloria's teenage daughter Donna, joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to desegregate public facilities. Gloria refused to commit to non-violence as a protest tactic. She watched her father, a wealthy businessman in Cambridge, die of a heart attack due to lack of medical facilities available to black people. To Gloria, passive, “non-violent” protests did not work, although she supported her daughter during the sit-ins and picketing of segregated businesses. Meanwhile, Gloria was working in the background with the Black community's secretive intelligence-sharing network, known as the “grapevine”, providing information to SNCC on Cambridge's political system and the opinions of the Black community. Gloria refused to remain silent while observing her daughter and other student protesters be attacked and demeaned by counter-protesters. Gloria attended workshops that trained protesters to withstand the hatred of violent mobs, who used racial slurs and demeaning acts to prevent peaceful assembly.

When the SNCC protests started to lose momentum, Gloria, along with other parents of SNCC members founded the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee (CNAC) which became the only adult-led SNCC affiliate in the civil rights organization's history. CNAC's focus went further than desegregated public facilities, it included housing, employment discrimination, and inadequate healthcare in its demands. In 1962, Gloria was selected to lead the CNAC, making her the first black woman to lead a grassroots civil rights organization outside of the deep South. That same year, the group focused their efforts on voter registration to mobilize the power of the vote.

Gloria and CNAC refused to commit to non-violence and their protests were often confrontational. Race Street, which separated the city's black and white communities, became a battle zone. Their 1963 protests prompted Maryland Governor J. Millard Tawes to send in the National Guard. The city remained under martial law, for more than a year. On July 14, 1963, Governor Tawes met with Gloria and other leaders. He offered to integrate schools, hire a black person in the State Employment Office, apply for a federal loan for a “Negro housing project”, pass a public accommodations ordinance, and a biracial commission to work on the other problems, in exchange for a year-long suspension of civil demonstrations. Gloria rejected committing to stopping demonstrations unless there was a full desegregation of schools and complete fairness in job opportunities.

While Cambridge remained under National Guard control, Gloria met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy to negotiate the “Treaty of Cambridge”, an agreement covering desegregation, housing and employment. The Treaty required cooperation from the local community which did not support the proposed changes. Later that year, Gloria attended the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. She was one of six women permitted on stage that day including Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Myrlie Evers, Prince Lee, and Daisy Bates. None of the women were permitted to address the crowd on this historic day.

History would mark CNAC as the symbol of radical Black activism in Cambridge. With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, CNAC's influence diminished. But the Treaty of Cambridge marked an important transition in the importance of public accommodations for Black citizens along the Eastern Shore.

By the summer of 1964, Gloria, now 42 year old, resigned from CNAC and married her second husband, photographer Frank Dandridge. She moved to New York, but maintained ties to CNAC's successor organization, Black Action Federation (BAF). Gloria worked for the City's Department of Aging and National Council for Negro Women and Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited and Associated Community Teams for the next 50 years. In 2017, the state of Maryland honored her legacy by dedicating February 11 as “Gloria Richardson Day”. On July 21 of the same year, Gloria's image appears on a 50'x20' mural in Cambridge. She is prominently placed left of center next to Dorchester native and Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman. On July 15, 2021, Gloria Richardson Dandridge died of natural causes at the age of 99.

