

Memory and attention

[Experience](#), [Memories](#)



Dorothy Irene Height was born March 24, 1912 in Richmond, Virginia to Fannie Burroughs and James Height. Both of Height's parents had been widowed twice before and each brought children to the marriage. Fannie Burroughs and James Height had two children together, Dorothy and her sister Anthanette. In 1916 the family moved north to Rankin, Pennsylvania (near Pittsburgh) where Height attended public schools. Height's mother was active in the Pennsylvania Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and regularly took Dorothy along to meetings where she early established her " place in the sisterhood.

Height's long association with the YWCA began in a Girl Reserve Club in Rankin organized under the auspices of the Pittsburgh YWCA. An enthusiastic participant, who was soon elected President of the Club, Height was appalled to learn that her race barred her from swimming in the pool at the central YWCA branch. " I was only twelve years old. I had never heard of 'social action,' nor seen anyone engaged in it, but I barely took a breath before saying that I would like to see the executive director," Height related in her 2003 memoir. Though her arguments could not bring about a change in policy in 1920s Pittsburgh,

Height later dedicated much of her professional energy to bringing profound change to the YWCA. In need of money to attend college, Height entered an oratorical contest sponsored by the IBPO Elks. Her speech on the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U. S. Constitution won her a full four-year scholarship. Turned down for admission to Barnard because the college's quota of two African-American students per year was already filled,

Height instead went to New York University where she earned a B. S. in the School of Education in 1932 and an M. A. in psychology in 1934.

From 1934-37, Height worked in the New York City Department of Welfare, an experience she credited with teaching her the skills to deal with conflict without intensifying it. From there she moved to a job as a counselor at the YWCA of New York City, Harlem Branch, in the fall of 1937. Soon after joining the staff there, Height met Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt at a meeting of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) held at the YWCA. In her 2003 memoir, Height described the meeting: " On that fall day the redoubtable Mary McLeod Bethune put her hand on me.

She drew me into her dazzling orbit of people in power and people in poverty.... 'The freedom gates are half ajar,' she said. 'We must pry them fully open. ' I have been committed to the calling ever since. " The following year Height served as Acting Director of the YWCA of New York City's Emma Ransom House residence. In addition to her YWCA and NCNW work, Height was also very active in the United Christian Youth Movement, a group intensely interested in relating faith to real world problems. In 1939 Height went to Washington, DC to be Executive of the Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the DC YWCA.

She returned to New York City to join the YWCA national staff in the fall of 1944, joining the program staff with " special responsibility" in the field of Interracial Relations. This work included training activities, writing, and working with the Public Affairs committee on race issues where her " insight into the attitude and feeling of both white and negro people [was] heavily

counted on. " It was during this period that the YWCA adopted its Interracial Charter (1946), which not fight against injustice on the basis of race, " whether in the community, the nation or he world. Convinced that segregation causes prejudice through estrangement, Height facilitated meetings, ran workshops, and wrote articles and pamphlets aimed at helping white YWCA members transcend their fears and bring their daily activities in line with the Association's principles. In 1950 Height moved to the Training Services department where she focused primarily on professional training for YWCA staff. She spent the fall of 1952 in India as a visiting professor at the Delhi School of Social Work, then returned to her training work in New York City.

The increasing omentum of theCivil Rightsmovement prompted the YWCA's National Board to allocate funds to launch a country-wide Action Program for Integration and Desegregation of Community YWCAs in 1963. Height took leave from her position as Associate Director for Training to head this two-year Action Program. At the end of that period, the National Board adopted a proposal to accelerate the work " in going beyond token integration and making a bold assault on all aspects of racial segregation. It established an Office of Racial Integration (re-named Office of Racial Justice in 1969) as part of the Executive Office. In her role as its first Director, Height helped to monitor the Association's progress toward full integration, kept abreast of the civil rights movement, facilitated " honest dialogue," aided the Association in making best use of its African-Americanleadership(both volunteer and stafO, and helped in their recruitment and retention.