

COMMENTARY

In Celebration of Black History Month

Civil Rights Heroine Tours for Schiller Institute

Black History Month couldn't have been more beautifully, or fittingly, celebrated, than with the East Coast tour in February of Schiller Institute Vice-Chairman Amelia Robinson, one of the true heroines of the American Civil Rights movement. Speaking before students, seniors, church groups and Civil Rights organizations, and on numerous radio talk shows, Mrs. Robinson, now 87 years "young," delighted and challenged the thousands who heard her, as she recounted her experiences since the 1920's, organizing for fundamental rights for the poor and African-American population in Alabama, even before she brought Dr. Martin Luther King there to organize out of her Selma home. When she linked those experiences to her current leadership role in the LaRouche political movement, jaws dropped, and minds were deeply moved.

Mrs. Robinson is best known internationally for her courageous stand for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, where she invited Dr. King, then a virtual pariah, to make his office in her home in 1965. The story of this fight is recounted in her autobiography, *Bridge Across Jordan*, published by the Schiller Institute. Her photo travelled around the world on March 7, 1965, when she was gassed, beaten, and left for dead on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, during the "Bloody Sunday" march. That event sparked the international mass movement which led, eventually, to the passage of the Voting Rights Act and its signing into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

But Amelia Robinson's efforts for justice and Civil Rights began long before 1965. From the 1930's, she and her husband, S.W. Boynton, fought for voting rights and property ownership for African-Americans in the poorest rural areas of Alabama, where she worked as Home Demonstration Agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture,



EIFRNS/Stuart Lewis

Amelia Boynton Robinson greets students after addressing three grades at Cool Spring Elementary School in Leesburg, Virginia, during a previous tour in February 1997. (Walker in picture, used during recuperation from surgery, has since been retired.)

and he as County Agent. Bill Boynton gave his life for this cause, dying young of a heart attack brought on by the years of hard labor and harassment his work provoked.

During the 1960's, Mrs. Robinson's home and office became the center of Selma's Civil Rights battles, used by Dr. King and his lieutenants, by Congressmen and attorneys from around the nation, to plan the demonstrations that would lead eventually to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1964, she became the first African-American woman ever to seek a seat in Congress from Alabama, and the first woman, white or Black, to run on the Democratic ticket in the state.

Today, Amelia Robinson is Vice-Chairman of the Schiller Institute, founded by Helga Zepp LaRouche, which she considers to be "following in the footsteps of Martin Luther King." With the Institute, she has toured the United States and Europe over the past ten years, addressing citizens about the

lessons of the Martin Luther King movement for today.

On July 21, 1990, Mrs. Robinson was awarded the Martin Luther King, Jr., Freedom Medal, honoring her lifelong commitment to human rights and Civil Rights. It is this history that she brought to the Black History Month tour.

Teaching Real History

Undoubtedly, Mrs. Robinson's greatest impact was on the hundreds of school-age children she addressed, at over a dozen schools in Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C.

Mrs. Robinson spent a week addressing school children in seven Baltimore inner-city and suburban locations. She spoke to elementary and middle-school children, at a school for handicapped children, and at a school for unwed expectant mothers.

On Feb. 16, she addressed a total of 480 students at two elementary schools. At Sinclair Elementary, which is largely African-American, Mrs. Robinson asked

who wants to be President of the United States. Fifty students raised their hands. She said, the reason she asked is because “God made no junk.” “Wisdom is a very precious thing,” she said, “and your minds are precious cups. If you dig deep enough, you will find precious stones.” She told the students not to be afraid to think, to go to the library and get information about the world. “Fear is a cancer,” she said. “It will stunt your mind if you allow it to. Your instructors are here to help you dig a little deeper to find those precious stones in your mind that you can contribute to help your fellow man.”

The students peppered her with questions. What happened after Dr. King was shot on the balcony, asked one. How did it affect the country when Dr. King died, asked another. Mrs. Robinson said that Dr. King taught love and justice, and after the assassination, the country was in mourning. She relayed her experience in East Germany, which she visited with a Schiller Institute delegation of Civil Rights leaders after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There’s a room there dedicated to Dr. King, she said, to which people went to be revived in the struggle for freedom.

A student asked if she had been there when Dr. King made his “I have a dream” speech. Yes, she responded. “I was standing under the arm of Abraham Lincoln at the Memorial in Wash-



Courtesy of Amelia Boynton Robinson

Greeted by President Lyndon B. Johnson, on a visit to Washington, D.C. following the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

ington, D.C.” Another asked if it were true that Dr. King’s house had been bombed. Mrs. Robinson responded, shaking up the students, “Yes, and they intended to kill his daughter Yolanda, who was in the back of the house when they bombed the front.”

Instrument for the Good

Whether she knew Civil Rights heroine Rosa Parks was a question asked of her at several stops on the tour. Mrs. Robinson told her audiences that she had known Mrs. Parks since she was a girl in her sister’s 4-H Club. “But she was not

the first to refuse to give up her seat,” said Mrs. Robinson. “The problem was that with the others, their lives had been tainted by drugs and crime, but Rosa had a clean record. Because of this, they could use her to catalyze the fight.” She emphasized to the students, “You too must fight to keep a clean record, so you can be an instrument for the good.”

Mrs. Robinson often jokes that *she* is the rightful “grandmother of the Civil Rights movement”—a title often given Rosa Parks. “I’m ten years her senior,” says Mrs. Robinson.

At Cool Spring Elementary School in Leesburg, Virginia, 180 mostly fifth graders heard Mrs. Robinson. Here, she emphasized that, while many parents are on drugs, you can’t blame your mistakes on someone else. “You are the ‘master of your fate,’ the ‘captain of your soul,’” she told them, quoting from the poem “Invictus.” Asking the students to think about how to follow in Dr. King’s footsteps, she said that when King was killed, people got very angry, which King would not have approved of. “Dr. King said, ‘I’m here to be a drummer for justice,’ and didn’t want people to weep for him when he died.”

Here and elsewhere, she told the story of the drowning of her second husband, who gave his life to save a friend when a boat carrying the three of them capsized. “I told myself that God has too much for me to do to let me drown. God works in mysterious ways, he gives



EIFNS/Stuart Lewis

Interviewed on the picket line outside Congressman Jim Moran’s district office, Franconia, Virginia, September 1998. Mrs. Robinson accused Moran of being “a leader of the treasonous ‘New Democrats’ trying to stampede President Clinton into resigning.”

you something to do.” That something, she said, is her work today with the Schiller Institute. Though people told her to shun LaRouche as an “extremist,” she said, they had also told her to shun King. “I looked into it, and they were doing what Dr. King had done, so I started to work with them.”

The children asked whether she had ever been a slave. Mrs. Robinson replied, “No, but people can be enslaved in their own minds.” They also asked what it was like to be beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and about her experience helping sharecroppers become full citizens.

With Sister Helen

One of the most poignant parts of the tour was her joint interview with anti-death-penalty leader Sister Helen Prejean, author of “Dead Man Walking,” which was turned into the Academy Award-winning movie. The two heroines were interviewed by the Schiller Institute’s Nina Ogden at Washington’s National Cathedral on Feb. 4, where Sister Helen spoke later in the evening.

Nina Ogden began the interview noting that Schiller Institute founder Helga Zepp LaRouche had recently reminded her of Mother Teresa’s statement—“Some people think miracles just happen, but you and I know that they take very hard work”—and that this was the appropriate theme for the videotape featuring these two “warrior angels.”

Sister Helen thanked Mrs. Robinson for all the good she has done in her lifetime, telling her, “Sitting here at the National Cathedral with you, reminds me that shortly before he went on his final trip to Memphis, Dr. King spoke at this church. What he did and what you did, makes it possible for us to speak out for human dignity today.”

Mrs. Robinson, in turn, thanked Sister Helen for the work she has done on the death penalty, “Not just speaking out, but going to the men on death row and helping them until the moment of their execution,” she said. “What we need to figure out is what to do to change the system, so that people don’t end up on death row. If we just look at the justice system’s frameup of Lyndon LaRouche or the horrible thing that is

happening to the President, we know we’ve got to fix the system.” (The videotaped interview, produced by “EIR Talks,” will be available for sale and distribution later this year.)

Black Weeklies

The entire front page of the Black History Month special issue of the *Hartford Inquirer* and four other weeklies, whose circulation totals 125,000, was devoted to Amelia Boynton Robinson, as a result of her tour. Headlined “The ‘Grandmother’ of the Civil Rights Movement,” the article featured the famous picture of Amelia Boynton being dragged away from sheriffs’ horses in Selma, with the sub-title,

‘following in the footsteps of Martin Luther King.’

“Amelia’s firm belief is that God created each of us for a good reason, for a special mission, which each must discover. Thus, she brings forth optimism wherever she goes, whether to Croatia amidst ethnic violence, or to Washington, D.C. schools, amidst drugs and despair. Today, the same bunch of hate-filled Confederates are trying to lynch our President, and, as in Selma, many are covering in fear.

“If you could use a dose of wisdom, courage, and optimism, call on Amelia; and don’t wait. She’s pushing 90, and is very busy. Let her little light shine!”



Signing copies of her autobiography, “*Bridge Across Jordan*,” at Cool Spring Elementary School, February 1997.

“On Black Sunday, 1965, Amelia was among the leaders of the famous march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. As they crossed the bridge, state troopers gassed her, grabbed her, and left her for dead. Who better to celebrate for Black History Month than the heroine of the right to vote?”

The article reports, “It was no accident that Amelia was on the front line in 1965, nor that she is still on the front line of the fight for justice and dignity today. . . .

“Amelia received the Martin Luther King, Jr. Freedom Medal in 1990. She is vice-chairman of the Schiller Institute, founded by Lyndon LaRouche and his wife Helga, whom she considers to be

Mrs. Robinson, at age 87, inspired thousands of people during the month, with her vigorous commitment to a life devoted to truth, courage, and love. She said, when asked about the experience, that she felt blessed to be able to give so much to the people she met, because “everything I give makes me the richer for having given it.”

Everywhere she spoke, people sensed that living history was in the room, her presence and her quiet dignity inspiring those who met her to want to be like her. The tour was truly an historic event, and will be cherished as such by all those lucky enough to have been touched by her.

—Marianna Wertz