

Velma Bell Hamilton: College and Community for All

We're celebrating Black History Month at the college this month and what better way to recognize the contributions of African Americans to our college and our community than to introduce you to Velma Bell Hamilton.

The first full-time African American educator hired in Madison, Velma Hamilton joined what was then Madison Vocational and Adult School in 1950 and worked at the college until the late 1970s. She began her career here as an English and history teacher but moved up to become dean of General Studies and Liberal Arts. She had a strong impact on the students and staff at the college, but her contributions went well beyond the doors of the college.

Putting education first from day one

She was born Velma Bell in 1910 rural Pontotoc, Mississippi. In 1914, her father, Walter Bell, moved his family north in search of better life and found a job in a busy locomotive factory in Beloit, Wisconsin.

She later said that even though her father had not had the opportunity himself, he put a strong emphasis on the importance of education and always assumed his daughter would go to college and, so, she did.

She was the only African American student at Beloit College in the 1920s but this did not get in the way of her drive for excellence. In 1928 she was the first African American inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa honor society, graduating the next year magna cum laude with a bachelor's degree in sociology.

She taught for a short time at Bennett College in North Carolina before heading to the University of Wisconsin where she earned an MA in sociology. Returning to Beloit, she met and married Harold Hamilton, a promising young chemist who later earned a PhD in soil science and taught at UW for many years.

After a few years in the south, the Hamiltons moved with their three small children to Madison permanently in 1942. Velma Hamilton began teaching English and sociology part-time for the UW Extension and then came on board full time at Madison College.

Making the community connection

Of course, Madison had its share of racism and discrimination during the 1940s. Because no one would sell to them in the city, the Hamiltons were forced to buy a house on what was then the far west outskirts of town, and they were keenly aware of the struggles of a very tiny African American community in Madison at the time.

As Harry Hamilton pointed out in a 1961 interview, African Americans made up less than one percent of the Madison population. He said most of the families had been in the community for more than two decades but the number of black professionals was only about 15 individuals in the whole city.

Still, in that same interview, Velma Hamilton said Madison had its advantages. In Madison, she said, "We can participate directly in the mainstream of community life here. More so than in a city like Chicago where Negro participation for the most part is limited to the Negro community."

And participate they did. When some young activists in town decided to restart the Madison chapter of the NAACP, they looked to Velma Hamilton to become the president. Both Velma and Harry were charter members and took stints as president. During WWII, the couple worked to desegregate the local USO.

A lifetime of contribution

In her time at the college, she also served two terms on the Governor's Commission on Human Rights, on the board of the Wisconsin Committee on Children and Youth and on the board of her alma mater Beloit College. She was very active in her church, served as PTA president at her children's school and was named to the newly formed Wisconsin Arts Board in 1973.

Hamilton received numerous honors for her work on civil rights and education including 1961 Citizen of the Year from the Madison Newspaper Guild, 1974 Wisconsin Mother of the Year and honors from the Madison Rotary and the Madison Community Foundation. Upon retirement, she took up the cause of senior citizens serving for a number of years as chairperson for the Dane County Commission on Aging.

In 1993, Van Hise Middle School was renamed in her honor. Ten years later, in an interview in the Capital Times, her daughter Muriel said that her mother was very humble and didn't speak much about her many other honors but managed to mention the school whenever she could. She was very proud and deeply touched by that honor and made a point to attend events at the school as long as she was able.

Harry Hamilton died in 1996 and Velma Hamilton left the city to live closer to her daughter in 2003. She died in 2009, but her legacy lives on in the many lives she touched, especially in the successes of her students and in the tremendous impact she had on the Madison community.