Standing on Shoulders

The Sankofa bird is a mythic bird of the Akan people of West Africa. It moves forward while looking backward and has come to symbolize the wisdom of learning from the past to build for the future. My elementary school teachers in West Philadelphia during the early 1960s deeply understood the concept of Sankofa. They did not teach Black history in a single period (it was Negro history week then), but taught it year round. They realized that prevailing societal attitudes often devalued the lives and potential of Black children. These teachers saw history as a tool to counter such negative attitudes. They taught us that Black life in America was not just about struggles, sorrow, and stereotypes, but about joy, success, and contributions.

My teachers were not naïve—they did not shield us from the nation’s racial realities. We learned about the courage of civil rights workers and the horrors occurring in places such as Birmingham and Selma, AL. We were told that we should always vote because, “people died so that Black people could vote.” My teachers wanted us to know that as we made our way through a world that might be hostile to us because we were Black, we should look to the past for sustenance, guidance, and hope. They reminded us that we were standing on the shoulders of others.

One person on whose shoulders I have stood is Dr. Helen O. Dickens, a former professor of obstetrics and gynecology and associate dean of minority affairs at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Dr. Dickens, whose father was born a slave, would have been 100 years old on February 21, 2009. She is clearly an important figure in Black history. She graduated from the University of Illinois School of Medicine in 1934 and was the only Black woman in her class. In 1950, she became the first Black woman admitted to the American College of Surgeons. She was the first Black woman on the medical school faculty at Penn. Dickens died on December 2, 2001, at the age of 92.

Dr. Dickens found support from the Black women physicians who had come before her and she followed in the steps of her professional foremothers. She became my mentor and was a constant source of encouragement, advice, and wisdom. She often told me, “You must always find, in your own way, how to right a wrong.” She herself was a quiet activist and dedicated her life to improving health care for Black Americans and increasing the number of Black medical professionals. In the 1960s, in an effort to decrease teenage pregnancies, she took the controversial step of teaching teens about contraception.

Helen O. Dickens would have shared in the exhilaration over the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States. However, I think that she would have also reminded us that we still have much work to do in our efforts toward racial equality and social justice, and that we must continue to find ways to right wrongs. Although November 4 was a day of triumph, it was also the day that three states passed antigay referenda and one state passed an antiaffirmative action referendum. As we move forward in our work, the lessons from my elementary teachers about the importance of history still ring true.

Vanessa Northington Gamble, MD, PhD
George Washington University
Editorial Board, AJPH

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