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**From the Desk of Diane Kiesel: Another Alpha Kappa Alpha Who
Made an Impact Before Vice President Harris**

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*Diane Kiesel is the author of [She Can Bring Us Home: Dr. Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, Civil Rights Pioneer](#) (Potomac Books, 2015). *She Can Bring Us Home* is the winner of the 2015 Richard Slatten Award for excellence in Virginia biography and the 2016 Colonial Dames of America Book Award for the best chronicle of American history and life.*

While the world watched history being made with the inauguration of Kamala Harris, the forty-ninth vice president and the first woman and first woman of color in that role, newscasters took note of her signature strand of pearls. She was sworn in wearing a set of pearls, accented with gold and diamonds, to complete her purple dress and matching coat ensemble. Pearls are the symbol of Harris' beloved sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, founded in 1908 at her alma mater, Howard University in Washington, D.C. They represent the original founders of that sisterhood, whose motto is "by culture and by merit." Today there are nearly 300,000 members of AKA, joined together by their passion for public service.

Harris is as rightfully proud of her sorority as it is of her. Her fierce intelligence, record of achievement and marvelous fashion sense harken back to another famous AKA sister (or soror, as they call themselves), Dr. Dorothy Boulding Ferebee. The tenth president of AKA, Ferebee directed the Mississippi Health Project during the Great Depression. With a team of volunteer nurses, Ferebee led a traveling medical caravan 1,000 miles south to tend to the unmet health needs of 15,000 destitute sharecroppers—some of whom had never seen a toothbrush, let alone a doctor. For seven summers until World War II gasoline rationing forced it to end, AKA sponsored Ferebee's trip to the muggy Delta to help this forgotten population. To this day, the United States Public Health Service lauds it as one of the most successful volunteer public health projects in history. It was that success that made Ferebee a household name.



Top Left:
Dr.
Dorothy
Boulding
Ferebee
on the
steps of
the U.S.
Capitol.
National
Park
Service,
National
Archives
for Black

Women's
History,
Records
of the
NCNW,
Series
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Like Vice President Harris, Ferebee shared AKA's values. When Ferebee, who was a Black woman born in Virginia in 1898, entered medical school in 1920 there were only sixty-five African American women doctors in the entire country. Although she graduated with honors from Tufts Medical School in 1924, her sole opportunity for an internship and employment was at the segregated Freedman's Hospital, affiliated with the medical school at Howard University. Ferebee remained there for most of her 40-year career as an obstetrician.

But Ferebee's ambition, aspirations and achievements did not stop there. On the eve of World War II, when she was AKA president (she served from 1939 to 1941), she sought to end segregation in the military and worked to bring more women into positions of power in government. During her term, the sorority also supported federal anti-lynching legislation and expanded its lobbying organization to push Congress towards equal justice.

Her activism continued after her tenure as AKA's leader ended. In 1949, on the eve of the explosion of the civil rights movement, Ferebee became the second president of the National Council of Negro Women, following its founder, the iconic Mary McLeod Bethune. During her four years as NCNW president Ferebee used that platform to advise presidents and testify before Congress on key issues of concern to people of color.

In the 1960s, when she was already a senior citizen, Ferebee traveled to Selma to help secure the Voting Rights Act. During that same decade she went to the Third World for the U.S. Department of State to bring best health care practices to Foreign Service personnel assigned to desolate outposts. In the 1970s, she led a delegation to International Women's Year in Mexico City and chaired the District of Columbia Commission on the Status of Women where she worked to make the nation's capital a haven for legal, safe abortion.

When she died in 1980, the *Washington Post* published a glowing editorial about her. "It took more than a little courage to break down the barriers of sex and color," the editors wrote. "Dorothy Ferebee knew how to do so with a marvelous blend of compassion, cussedness and class."

Ferebee was a product of her time, and in her time, women of substance always made it a point to look as professional as possible. She was a coveted speaker at schools, churches, and meeting halls. Newspaper photographs often showed her standing before a podium wearing a stylish suit, matching shoes and handbag, fashionable hat with a veil and a fresh flower corsage. Even in 1935 in the broiling cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta, while inoculating children against smallpox, Ferebee clipped on a pair of white button earrings to match her doctor's uniform.

Ferebee would have admired Vice President Harris not only for her substance, but for her style, too. For readers who think this nod to the new vice president's fashion sense is sexist, take note of the *New York Times* article published the day after the inauguration, "The Outfits That Sent a Message," by Vanessa Friedman. The author pointed out that President Biden, as well Vice President Harris, made sartorial

choices that spoke to an image they hoped to convey. The vice president's pearls, different styles of which she wears whenever in public, speak to the important role the values of AKA play in her life; values shared by Ferebee in her own lifetime.

Nothing pleased Ferebee more than to mentor younger, promising women. In her public remarks on inauguration night, Harris said: "It is my honor to be here, to stand on the shoulders of those who came before, to speak tonight as your Vice President." On January 20, 1945, Ferebee sat shivering with other honored guests at FDR's final inauguration ceremony. Although impossible, one can fantasize that if she were still alive, and if there were no tragic pandemic to limit the number of participants, Ferebee would have been a guest at the Biden-Harris swearing-in. She would have been thrilled to know that her strong shoulders helped a fellow AKA soror achieve the second-highest office in the country. And, like the vice president, she surely would have worn a strand of pearls to mark the occasion—probably the same set that was presented to her by the AKA sorors at the end of her term as their president in 1941.

