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2-17-2016

From the desk of Diane Kiesel: Dorothy Ferebee's story

Diane Kiesel

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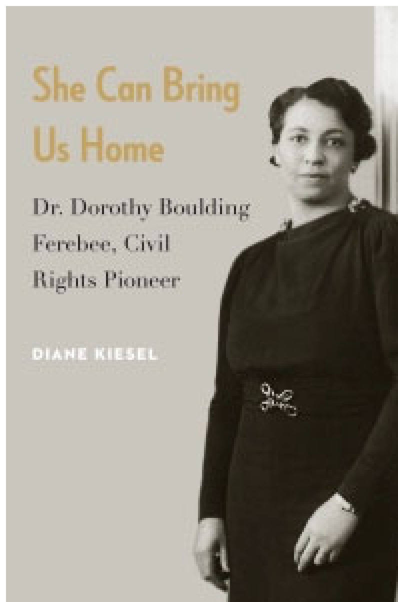

Diane Kiesel is an acting justice of the New York State Supreme Court. She presides in the Bronx County Criminal Term. A former journalist, she is a winner of the Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism and is the author of Domestic Violence: Law, Policy, and Practice *and* **She Can Bring Us Home: Dr. Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, Civil Rights Pioneer** *(August 2015).*

Later this month, the 88th Academy Awards will be hosted in Hollywood. Although African American comedian Chris Rock will be the face of the Oscars as the 2016 host, the event has been steeped in controversy. No African American in the industry has been nominated for an award this year. The overlooked achievements of black professionals in Hollywood has made me think a lot about the overlooked achievement of a woman about whom I've been thinking and writing about for more than thirty years.

One September morning in 1980, while living and working as a newspaper reporter in the nation's capital, I found an obituary in the *Washington Post* about a local African American doctor and civil rights' activist named Dorothy Boulding Ferebee. She had died the day before, age 81. According to the article, she had been one of the most famous black women in the country during the 1950s. In a less racist era, Ferebee likely would have been the most famous woman in America. Period.

I had never heard of her, but I was instantly mesmerized by her story. In sum, she became a doctor in Jim Crow America against all odds. When Ferebee entered medical school in 1920 there were sixty-five black women doctors *in the entire country*! Although she graduated with honors from Tufts Medical School in 1924, her sole opportunity was at the all-black Freedmen's Hospital in Washington, D.C.

During the Great Depression Ferebee led one of the most famous public health programs in history, the Mississippi Health Project, through which she and a team of volunteer nurses from the elite Alpha Kappa Alpha black service sorority brought traveling medical care to 15,000 destitute sharecroppers; some of whom had never seen a toothbrush, let alone a doctor.

On the eve of World War II Ferebee was president of AKA through which she sought to end segregation in the military and bring more women into positions of power in the government. In the early 1950s, on the eve of the explosion of the civil rights movement, she was the second national president of the National Council of Negro Women, following the iconic Mary Bethune. Ferebee used her platform to advise presidents and testify before Congress on key issues involving integration.

In the 1960s, she went to Selma for the voting rights campaign. During that same decade Ferebee traveled in the third world for the U.S. State Department to bring the best health care practices to foreign service personnel assigned to desolate outposts. A decade later, 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 pushed to make the nation's capital a haven for legal abortion.

A few days after running the obituary, 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."

Dorothy Ferebee stayed on my mind for nearly thirty years. Although I had considered writing more about her in 1980, I was on the cusp of changes in my own life—leaving journalism for law school and a new career. But as far as the rest of the world was concerned, Dorothy Ferebee and her amazing, important work fell into obscurity.

Early in 2000, I returned to my journalism roots and wrote a textbook about domestic violence law. After completing that book I started thinking more intently about Ferebee. Had anyone, anywhere, been as captivated by her as me? In 2008, with seventeen feet of her papers at Howard University and information about her in the collections of others around the country, as well as the few people who knew her not getting any younger, I decided Dorothy Ferebee's story had waited long enough.

When Ferebee died in 1980, the world was focused on the Iranian hostage crisis and many may have sensed that with the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts in the 1960s, the fight for racial equality was behind us. Had she lived longer, as did the late Dorothy Height who also headed the National Council of Negro Women and whose 2010 eulogy was given by President Obama, perhaps her many achievements would have earned greater recognition. Or, it may be that the world caught up to her vision and her actions no longer seemed so unique. Today, social work agencies take care of the poor in a way they did not when she started the Southeast Settlement in 1929; the Supreme Court upheld a woman's right to choose abortion in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, and the Affordable Care Act has brought health care to the same population Dorothy served in Mississippi all those years ago.

Whatever the reason, as Black History Month Draws to a close and Women's History Month begins in March, it is worth considering why the achievements and life stories of Dorothy Ferebee, as with so many other African Americans and women, remain unknown, obscure and without public recognition. There are many rich, inspiring, untold stories out there. So many that a recent survey taken in anticipation of the new Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture, scheduled to open this fall, found that 48 percent of the respondents considered the untold stories of African Americans to be the most important mission of the new institution. These stories must be written and movies about these unknown heroes must be made. History will be the better for it. And Hollywood will be, too.

-Diane Kiesel