

Speech for Alberta J. Canada Building Celebration and Art Reveal - June 10, 2019

By Sierra Henderson, Theresa Henderson Brown and Melodee Henderson

Greetings and thank you all for being here. My name is Melodee and these are my sisters Theresa and Sierra. We represent the best parts of mom's personality: Theresa, the Mother to us all; Sierra, the scholar; and me...the quick-witted comic relief. We all grew up here on the Hilltop but for kicks, when people ask me where I'm from, I tell them Alberta Canada. Well technically, it's true.

Our family folklore says our mom got her unique name, in part, from a great-great grandfather. He was leaving the South after the Civil War seeking better opportunities in the North. Rumor has it, he adopted the last name Canada because that's where he was headed. Thankfully, he stopped here in this City of Destiny. And we are so thankful for this destiny.

When we were coming up, Tacoma was a place where you knew your neighbors; where kids played in the streets; where you picked blackberries from the neighbor's yard; and had picnics at Wright's park. It was where you watched the Daffodil parade and fed breadcrumbs to the ducks; where the Christmas program at the Cabellero's Club gave out gifts to families in need. We sometimes groaned at having to go to recitals at the Colored Women's Club, but, at least we knew a sense of community.

When our great-grandparents came here, ours was one of only a handful of Black families in the city. And certainly they struggled, but they also took advantage of opportunities that, perhaps, were only possible because this was a city of pragmatic pioneers--people willing to work hard, help their neighbors, and fight for what they believe in to make a better life.

Our mom knew struggle and it informed her life's work. Her dad died shortly before she was born and the family spent a brief period in the public housing development in Salishan. For a time, they survived with the help of public assistance. They had that special brand of resourcefulness that comes from having to do more with a lot less. You know how most parents have that story they tell their kids while the kids roll their eyes, like "When I was your age, I walked 10 miles to school everyday in the snow with no shoes on." Well, the version that we got was that mom and her 6 brothers and sisters had clothes made from potato sacks and had to eat rutabagas and parsnips out of the family garden." Try asking for a designer pair of jeans after that story.

But our Mom had a great reverence for people who had struggled and sacrificed. She was especially impressed by the selfless acts of people who put themselves on the line to protect the lives of strangers during the Civil Rights struggles of the 60s and 70s. She took note of the fact that the movements of the day put everyone to work. Anyone with any ability to contribute, whether preparing mailers and signs or driving carpools for bus boycotts, had a role in the struggle.

Mom worked over 20 years for the Social Security Administration and while there, she worked hard to prove herself and rose quickly in the ranks. Soon she was in Baltimore and Eugene Oregon, with the three of us in tow until finally, she decided that home was where we should be. Home and family were important to her. She remained here for the next 38 years.

She devoted her life to this community. MLKHDA renovated hundreds of homes here, improving our quality of life and making housing available to people who had never dreamed of living in a house, much less owning a home. They gave jobs to people who society had given up on. But most of all, they began to restore the pride in this community and motivated others to get involved. Mom knew that housing and civic engagement were critical to our stability as a community, critical to our identity and our ownership of our own destiny.

If you knew Mom, you couldn't help but be affected by her energy. When she wasn't running to city council meetings; she was counseling kids on the street or rolling up her sleeves and scrubbing floors so that a renovated home could be available for someone who'd never lived in one. She taught classes at Evergreen State College and presided at TCC Board Meetings. She secured private investment for our neighborhood by demonstrating that support of our common interests is good for us all. She taught city power players to lead with love.

When the city was proposing to build the new jail back in the 90s, she filed a lawsuit to make the city leaders consider alternatives to warehousing and wasting human potentials. She warned us that we should be building better opportunities instead of bigger jails because what we build will manifest into what our future will look like.

And like the movements of her youth, she encountered setbacks; there were times she doubted if her approach would make a difference but she was never deterred. She said: "People do not have to surrender to despair. Things may seem hopeless, corrupt, blasé; may seem that we won't be able to lift ourselves out of a perpetual funk; but we are here to persevere. We do not have to surrender and in not doing so we will derive a measure of healing and strength."

She believed in her community and advocated for people who were too ashamed or afraid to advocate for themselves. When people from outside the community hijacked the narrative of who the Hilltop was and what we were all about, she stood up for us and gave us back our humanity. She gave us hope when the mission seemed impossible. She taught us to reach past our preconceived notions, to investigate thoroughly, to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty, and to commit to lasting change. But most of all, she believed in the potential of each and every one of us to contribute something of value to our community and make it a better place.

And I think as progress inevitably rolls through, it is important to remember the people who struggled and those who still struggle. Mom would very much appreciate that her work and what she meant to this community is being remembered in a way that preserves space for the marginalized in our community. She would be proud of the people who continue to give selflessly of themselves to help the less fortunate, people who appreciate the universality of our plight, and take the time to see the humanity in the people they encounter.

Mom gave endlessly to this community but in turn she gained strength from it. She said, "When you heal others, you will be healed. Keep on working and never go back to waiting." We thank you for honoring her legacy.