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WOMEN AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN TAMPA: AN INTERVIEW WITH ELLEN. H. GREEN

by Stacy Braukman

The civil rights movement in Tampa was a decidedly moderate one. Beginning with the lunch counter sit-ins of 1960, the movement was led by middle-class African-American men representing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), local churches, and fraternal organizations.¹ As part of this moderate strand of activism, black women played significant, if not always publicly recognized, roles within their churches and within the NAACP. In Tampa, middle-class, church-going African-American women chaired membership and fund-raising drives. As volunteers from clubs and churches, they went door to door recruiting new members. Some became leaders of the NAACP Youth Council, and two women, Ellen H. Green and Helen Saunders, served as president of the Tampa Branch of the NAACP.²

Ellen Green, like countless other black women, gave her time, energy, and support to the civil rights struggle, more often than not balancing political activism with a full-time job and a family. Her contributions to the movement, and those of other black women who worked largely behind the scenes and performed the less glamorous work, deserve recognition as well as inclusion into the larger story of the civil rights movement in Tampa.

The following interview, conducted on May 20, 1992, provides insight into the activities of Ellen Green and other black women who campaigned for civil rights in Tampa.

* * * * *

Interview with Ellen H. Green:

Q: Let's start with your background – how long you have lived in Tampa, where did you attend school and what kind of work did you do?

Green: My entire life has been spent in Tampa. I was born here in Port Tampa in this house in 1915. After attending the Port Tampa Elementary School, I was transported to east Tampa to Booker T. Washington Junior and Senior High School, the only school for blacks. I am the oldest member, in years, at my church in Port Tampa – Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church,³ where I have served as a steward, trustee, and superintendent of the Sunday school for twenty-five years. I taught the intermediate class for approximately thirty years, and I've been a usher for fifty-six years.

My employment was varied. I began my professional career as an agent and clerk for the Afro-American Life Insurance branch office in Tampa. Then for three years and nine months, I was special secretary for the Pallbearers Grand Union.⁴ In 1951 I was hired in the Industrial Department of the Central Life Insurance Company.⁵ With a variety of duties I worked there for twenty-nine years and retired in 1980. After about two weeks I was asked to come help a friend with her duties at the now Progressive Pallbearers Grand Union. Then after five years I was elected the state financial secretary. It is something I have been trying to give up because I am



Ellen H. Green (left) presenting a National Council of Negro Women award to Clemmie James in the 1970s.

now seventy-seven. But new officers were just elected, and they asked me not to leave for now. Eleven years have passed since I retired, and I am still in the work force.

Q: When did you get involved in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People?

Green: In 1955 I became involved with the NAACP. I was asked to serve as recording secretary temporarily. Then I was elected the financial secretary and subsequently vice president. After that I successfully defeated the president and served as head of the Tampa Branch from 1959 to 1961. That created quite a bit of excitement because I had the honor of being the first woman president of the Tampa NAACP. Also it was just at the peak of time when blacks were realizing that there was a little more freedom in the world for them, and the fight for integration became very heated up. Through our demonstrations with the Youth Council of our chapter we went to the theaters and the lunch counters. And I ate my first sandwich at the lunch counter in the basement of McCrory's downtown on Franklin Street, with various individuals standing around looking at us. I did not know for sure if I was going to be able to really eat it, but they did not bother us. They accepted us and so the world changed colors. I worked real hard and ended up with a heart attack.

Q: When was that?

Green: December 1960. I was working at my job and running night and day. And I had an ill mother who was bedridden at home, and I had to have somebody sit with her while I was gone. But I would fix her food and leave everything prepared, and I kept all her clothes clean, so it was a bit much for me. The pressure took me down, but I still carried on. In 1961 I went to the NAACP national convention in Philadelphia. The doctor advised me that it was best that I slow down. But I was just thrilled to see so many changes coming fast. Public services, entertainment, and schools were being made available to blacks. This is what we had been living and hoping for, and to see it happening just motivated me to do everything that I could to help bring it to pass. So my career as president of the Tampa NAACP ended there, but I became treasurer after that time. I also served on several state committees and as state assistant recording secretary.

In 1966, after serving as vice president to the late Mrs. Lithia Davis, I was elected president of the Tampa Metro Chapter of the National Council of Negro Women. I served them for sixteen years. We had quite a unit there – one hundred and twenty ladies with fifty or sixty at a meeting.



**Ellen Green (right) and Juanita Hall
working at Central Life Insurance Company
in 1966.**



Clarence Fort in the 1970s.



Reverend A. Leon Lowry.

My civic career actually began in 1949 as a volunteer at the YWCA branch. In my twenty-nine years with the YWCA, I served as Young Adult Chairman for the branch and a board member. I was one of the first three black women that they integrated on the Board of Directors.

Q: Did you participate in demonstrations and protests during the 1960s?

Green: Yes, we went in pairs to the various lunch counters and eating places. Juanita Hall and I went to McCrory's and ordered a sandwich in 1960. We were quite fearful because the white onlookers didn't say anything. We didn't know what their attitude was, but they were passive.

Q: And they served you?

Green: Yes. There were different groups of us at different places all over downtown.

Q: Did you march or do any protesting?

Green: I didn't do any marching because I was working. The Youth Council was under the supervision of Mr. Charles Stanford, Mr. Clarence Fort and Reverend A. Leon Lowry.⁶ I was out there on the sidelines, running around raising the money and planning the programs. But I did go into the city.

Q: What about the theater protests? Did you participate in those?

Green: Yes, we were all out there together at one time or the other.

Q: *Were many other women doing that?*

Green: Yes, there were young girls and women. Many of the people out there with me were employees of Central Life, and officers of the Tampa Branch.

Q: *I wanted to talk about the role of the church in the civil rights movement in particular, the behind-the-scenes work of women.*

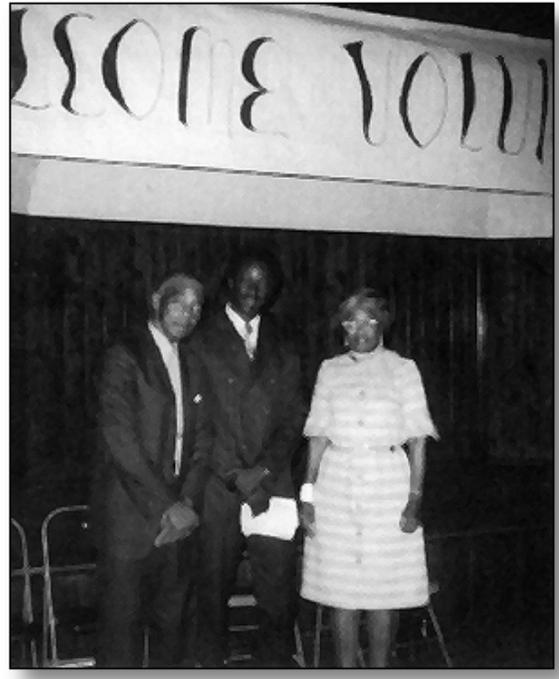
Green: Well, St. Paul A.M.E.⁷ and Beulah Missionary Baptist were the headquarters where we had all the mass meetings. Women were always there supporting the leaders, but we were never pushed to the front. Many of the black greats came to Tampa and held rallies at these churches to raise money to finance the legal and travel expenses. I remember we would have parties and fish fries at Progress Village. It would be three o'clock in the morning when I would get home after cleaning up the Vice-President's house. Levy Turner and I would get real upset with the others but then I would go and do it all over again. That's the way we raised our money to help send the Field Secretary and lawyers out there on the road, because they did not only work here, they worked throughout the state. People like Bob Saunders, the State Field Secretary, and Francisco A. Rodriguez⁸ and William Fordham were the attorneys.

Q: *Were a lot of the women at Central Life also in the NAACP?*

Green: Yes, we were a unit. We were just a big family there. And when I would have to leave to go to a NAACP meeting or a National Council of Negro Women meeting or the YWCA, the president would always say, "Mrs. Green is privileged to go because she is serving the community." They stood behind us there because they were members. Most of us were involved, running around quite a bit.

Q: *It seems like there was a connection between black-owned businesses and churches and the civil rights movement.*

Green: Yes, they all played an important role. The ministers supported us. I succeeded a minister as president of the Tampa Branch of the NAACP.



Ellen Green receiving an award "In Recognition of Outstanding YWCA Service" in 1966.

Q: I would like to hear about the National Council of Negro Women, especially how and when it began in Tampa and what kinds of things the group has done.

Green: It was organized in 1935 in Washington, D.C. Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune⁹ were very good friends, and they involved a group of women who were black and white. The founders were women of financial means who could do things to help black youth. Mrs. Bethune's world revolved around young people. So with Mrs. Roosevelt's help this group was organized, and then it branched out throughout the United States. Its commitment was to black youth. The purpose was and is to educate, inspire, aid black women, motivate youth by providing scholarship awards, visit nursing homes, organize entertainment, devise programs for unwed mothers, and raise funds, with shared contributions for the other civic groups. Mrs. Bethune was also president of Central Life for a while after Mr. G. D. Rogers died.

Q: So she lived in Tampa?

Green: She had an apartment in the original building of Central Life. She was a very astute lady – very distinguished and proud and an asset to the community.

Q: How long was she here?

Green: Well, she was here not quite a year.

Q: Is that when they organized a chapter of the NCNW here in Tampa?

Green: Our chapter was organized here in Tampa in 1937 by a group of prim ladies unaware of the meaning of Dr. Bethune's dream. They were finally dissolved. Later on another group was organized, and I was asked to become a member which I did, but didn't stay too long. In the middle sixties I went back. The president had become ill, so I would help her with the meetings. At election time I was elected Second Vice President to Mrs. Lithia Davis, but served in her place after her death. First Vice President, Mrs. Cancerina Martin made this statement to me: "I don't want to be the president. If you take it, I'll stand behind you." She was a woman of her word. She stood right with me until I got it all together, and we expanded in numbers. These were a great bunch of women. I was president from 1966 until 1982 when I retired.

Q: What kind of problems or issues did you deal with?

Green: Well, we did all kinds of things. We adopted girls at the foster homes out in Seffner. We would go out there and do parties for them and take them essentials. I was "Mom" and Mrs. Cancerina Martin (the vice president) was "Grandmom." We also did Easter egg hunts for poor children, and we did scholarships. Whatever was worthwhile, we were in the midst of it. Our major fundraising project was a banquet and a fashion show each year, which was very successful. Then we in turn made contributions to the Urban League and the NAACP. Whatever events that they had, we would attend in a group. And we would help poor women with money for their children. We would go to the nursing homes to visit the sick and leave toilet articles. Right now the group is supposed to be working with the AIDS program, and we're supposed to be working with the Spring.¹⁰ But it's all dragging. Whenever there was a need, we were there.



Officers of the Tampa Chapter of the National Council of Negro Women shown in the late 1970s (from left to right): Susan Padgett, Ellen Green, Florence Blair, Essie Feu, Jessie Artest, Alma, Morris, Reatha Williams, Minnie L. Sullivan, and Willie Mae Lewis.

And we're constantly teaching education for our children. In our youth council we have girls who have all gone on to be outstanding citizens – college-bound and all doing well. Anyway, I am really proud of what happened while I was there.

The National Council was designed for women of all walks of life. You were not supposed to overlook the maid or the housekeeper. She was supposed to be as important in that organization as anybody else. But we had more schoolteachers as members than just ordinary housewives. Mrs. Bethune's purpose was to bring together women from all walks of life, to let them reason together to help make the world a better place. And we tried to put it in action as much as we possibly could.

Q: Were a lot of these women also active in churches?

Green: Oh yes. Going to church is what strengthened us, gave us the stamina to reach up a little bit higher. And black women were an inspiration to the men also. Because even when the mother was without a husband, she was there constantly inspiring her children to raise up from where they were and reach up a little bit higher. The black woman has really been the chief moral support of the family. In the days when she was there washing and ironing for a living or doing

domestic work, she was working for her children to have a better life. She toiled and she sweated as she worked. So the day has come when we are just a little bit higher.

Q: *Did white women ever join any of these groups?*

Green: No, we didn't have any white women in the Council. There were white persons who would contribute to the NAACP – not necessarily women, but white persons. My involvement with white women was in the YWCA. We were all good friends. Really we got to be best friends.

Q: *Did you know Augusta Marshall, former president of the Tampa Urban League?*

Green: Oh sure, we were very close. She was also a member of the Council. She was very good at the Urban League, but Joanna Tolkey has stepped in her shoes and is doing a dynamic job. Augusta was there for quite a few years and then Joanna moved in and has done a beautiful job.

Q: *What are you involved in now?*

Green: I am not really involved in anything, except the NCNW and the Mayor's Community Awareness Advisory Committee for about ten years.

Q: *What is that?*

Green: We hold public forums to enlighten the people about what's going on, and we have various city officials come in and speak to the public. One segment of us goes out to work with the youth in schools – black and white children. We have committees that work with the police force to see what they are doing or to at least give some input into what they are doing. I am in a special group that looks after the neighborhood. Dope is really running rampant out here, and we monitor that sort of thing, looking at whatever concerns the neighborhoods in the city of Tampa. We have representatives from each neighborhood, and we meet every three months and discuss whatever we have done or what we want to do.

Q: *And this is made up of women and men, black and white?*

Green: Well, no, we are all black in this particular group. There is a Hispanic group, and then there is a regular white group. But they are all members of the Community Awareness Advisory Committee. That is really what I am involved in now because at my age I do not have the speed and the energy to run around and do all the things that I used to do. But I have spent my life in my church and in the community doing whatever I could to help make the world a better place for all of us

¹ For a thorough examination of the relationship between black church leaders, see Stephen F. Lawson, "From Sit-In to Race Riot: Businessmen, Black, and the Pursuit of Moderation in Tampa, 1960-1967," in *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation*, edited by Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 257-81.

² Press release from the Tampa Branch, NAACP, October 29, 1963, Robert and Helen Saunders Collection, Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Tampa, Florida; Helen Saunders, interview by author, Tampa, Florida, November 19, 1991.

³ Port Tampa's Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1889.

⁴ The Pallbearers Grand Union is a Florida burial society, whose Tampa lodge dates from the 1930s.

⁵ Central Life Insurance Company was founded in Tampa in April 1922 by a group of black businessmen interested in community development efforts to overcome adverse conditions created by segregation.

⁶ Clarence Fort, a twenty-one-year-old barber, was president of the NAACP Youth Council in 1960 and led sit-in demonstrations that sparked integration of lunch counters at stores in downtown Tampa. The dispute was mediated by Tampa's Biracial Committee, a recently formed group, that had several black members, including Reverend A. Leon Lowry, who went on to become the first black to attain public office in Tampa in 1977 when he was elected to the school board.

⁷ St. Paul A.M.E. Church, the second oldest black church in Tampa, was founded in 1870. The current structure, located at the corner of Harrison and Marion Streets, was completed in 1915.

⁸ Bob Saunders, a Tampa native, and Francisco Rodriguez, an Afro-Cuban attorney, were both active in the civil rights struggle in Tampa, where both served as head of the NAACP.

⁹ Mary McLeod Bethune founded the Dayton Normal and Industrial School for Girls in 1904, and in 1923 it was joined with the Cookman Institute of Jacksonville to become Bethune Cookman College, located in Daytona Beach, Florida. In the 1930s she worked as administrator in Roosevelt's New Deal.

¹⁰ The Spring is a private center in Tampa that offers a variety of social services for women.