

Ellen Green Remembered



Hillsborough Remembers

Charles F. "Fred" Hearn
by Darlene Harris
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This is an interview with Charles F. "Fred" Hearn, owner of Tampa Bay History Tours, LLC, of Tampa, Florida. This interview is being conducted on October the 15th, 2007 at the College Hill Library. The interviewer, my name, is Darlene Harris, representing Hillsborough County Public Library system's oral history collection project.

Darlene Harris (DH): *Mr. Hearn-- or you like to be referred to as Fred-- how long did you know Ellen Green?*

Fred Hearn (FH): I knew Mrs. Green probably for about the last fifteen years of her life. I had heard of her prior to that, but I actually met her in the mid-1980s, and I knew her up until, I guess, maybe the late 1990s, or around the year 2000.

DH: *OK, can you tell me, How did you meet Ms. Ellen Green- and when, and where? And then, elaborate more- I know you told me she served as a member of the African American Advisory Council. You want to expound on that?*

FH: Right. Well, I met Mrs. Green through the City of Tampa Mayor's African American Advisory Council, which at that time, had a different name, but that's the current name of the group. And the goals of the group are pretty much the same as they were back in the 1980s, when it was formed. It was for African Americans, especially those who are native to Tampa, or have lived here for a number of years, to come together and make recommendations on how different situations could be addressed that affect the African American community in Tampa.

And so Mrs. Green was one of about-- I guess initially, there were about 20 members of that group-- and she was one of those members primarily representing Port Tampa, which is, you know, the area where she grew up and where she lived. And she was very familiar with the needs in Port Tampa.

DH: *OK. OK. Can you tell us-- You said you'd known her--, you'd knew her for a number of years. What type of person was she? Can you tell us a little bit about--?*

FH: Yes. Mrs. Green was the kind of person who, in my opinion, listened first and spoke second. You know, sometimes we get a little bit of information, and sometimes we have a tendency to want to take that and run with it. But she seemed to be more analytical than anything else. She would listen to both sides

of a situation. And we had a lot of discussions in our council meetings where there was controversy.

I remember one particular incident, where in one year, we had, I think, five young men-- African American men-- who died while in police custody. This was in the late 1880s. I don't remember the exact year, but we had five young men who died in police custody. And it was happening so frequently that everybody was puzzled as to what is going on. And of course, she had some very strong opinions about that too, and she wanted to make sure that people's rights were protected.

But I can remember several people at one very heated meeting we had with the chief of police present. And Mrs. Green was always like the voice of reason. And you know, she, she would listen; she would pay attention to what people said, how they said it. And then she would make a statement that summarized her feelings, which she always put a lot of thought into.

I don't ever remember her saying something out of emotion. You know, she always thought before she spoke. And I think she realized that, you know, somebody had to keep, keep their head on their shoulders and make sure that they were making rational statements and not emotional statements. And so while sometimes others made emotional statements about a situation, she would always obviously put a lot of thought into anything that she said before she opened her mouth and spoke, because I think she realized that people did value her opinion and what she said. Somebody was going to be listening, and she wanted to make sure she was right.

DH: Oh, OK. OK. Now, I just want to ask you a question to clear up: You said in the 1880s. Did you mean in the 1980s?

FH: 1980s. I'm sorry.

DH: OK. Right. OK.

FH: I'm sorry. Yeah- 1980s.

DH: Just for transcription.

FH: Right.

DH: What would you consider her greatest accomplishment?

FH: Well, I believe Mrs. Green was the first-- if not the first, she certainly was one of the first-- woman presidents of the Tampa branch of the NAACP. And this was during a time in the 1950s when that was a pretty dangerous thing to do. We had several terrible things that happened to people who were involved in the

NAACP in the 1930s and '40s- and 1950s. Harry T. Moore and his wife were killed in Mims, Florida on Christmas night, 1951, I believe it was. And the following year, Bob Saunders took his place as state director of the NAACP. And he moved his office here to Tampa. And Mrs. Green, during that time period, somewhere in the 1950s, was the Tampa branch president.

And again, it was not an easy thing to do, because there was a lot of violence that took place. It wasn't just discrimination and prejudice that the NAACP and other organizations and other people stood up against. But you were taking, in some cases, your life in your hands. I mean, you were putting your family at risk. You were putting your job, your, your welfare, the welfare and well-being of people you loved at risk when you stepped out and took a leadership position with the NAACP- which today we might not think of it this way, but back then, was seen as a very militant organization, you know.

DH: Right.

FH: And so she was brave enough to do that. And again, because of the way she carried herself--. And always carried herself with a lot of dignity. You couldn't help but respect Mrs. Green, because that's the way she carried herself. And--. But for her to do that, I thought was very brave- for her to step out and take that leadership role. And she did it, and did it well.

DH: OK. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that. What did she look like? Can you describe Ellen Green for us?

FH: Yes. Mrs. Green was, was an attractive woman who--, even with age was still attractive. And I think her personality had a lot to do with it also. She was not very tall. I wouldn't call her thin, you know. She was, I guess, about average size.

I can remember that she, she always had her hair--. She never dyed her hair, so she weared her hair natural. So it was white as she got older. And I always thought that she, she looked very attractive with her natural hair, where, you know, so many other people, you know, do things to their hair to make it, make it look different. But I think she felt very blessed to have lived long enough to have that beautiful white hair that she had. And her hair, and her smile, and the way she would look at you through those glasses of hers- you know, I can remember that. And she was just--.

She had sort of a high-pitched voice. She didn't have a very loud voice. You know, she had sort of a petite manner about her- very lady-like. But again, you listened when she talked, you know. So she didn't have to yell or scream to get your attention. When Mrs. Green said something in those meetings, everybody shut up, because they wanted to hear what she had to say because of the respect, you know, that we had for her. Mm-hmm.

DH: OK. Now, you knew her. What was her occupation? What did she do for a living?

FH: Mrs. Green worked--. I don't know about all of her life, but I know she worked in the security and insurance business. She worked on Main Street, at a building, I think, near the corner of Albany and Main. And gosh, I can't remember the name of it, Darlene.

But I went over a couple of times. I had to take letters to her and different things when she was volunteering her time with the city. But it was either in the insurance or the security business. And she worked for an African American firm; I do know that.

DH: OK.

FH: That was probably the last job she held. I'm not sure where she worked earlier.

DH: OK. Now, with--. I know I've asked you a series of questions. But can you tell us, Do you have a favorite story or something you would like to share with us about Ellen Green- something you remember her for?

FH: Well, that she was a prayerful woman, and she didn't just talk about belief and faith in God, you know; she lived it in everything she did. And I can't really tell you any funny stories or anything, you know, out of the ordinary, except that I know that she and Mr. Nathaniel Cannon were very good friends. Mr. Nathaniel Cannon was also a member of this same council-- the Mayor's African American Council-- he and his son Norman.

And Nathaniel Cannon also grew up, or lived, in Port Tampa, where he raised his, his family. And they were always kind of like the one-two punch. And anytime we were talking about something that black folk needed in Tampa or something that the city needed to do to address an issue or concern, you know, when it came to Port Tampa, they were the two that were always going to be there to speak up and say, "Well, this is what we need in Port Tampa. This is what's happening." And they were concerned about all of Tampa, also. But they were kind of like partners, kind of like sidekicks.

And I know she was very much saddened when Mr. Cannon passed away, and--, as we all were when she passed away, too. But they were kind of like buddies, and I think they had a lot of history together, from fighting for sidewalks and things a lot of people, you know, take for granted.

So I can't say I have any, any funny stories or anything that--, you know, out of the ordinary, because, again, she always carried herself with such dignity that--.

She could laugh, and she knew how to laugh, and she loved to laugh. But she had a very serious side about her, because we were dealing with, just like we are now--

DH: *Right.*

FH: --some very serious, you know, issues.

DH: *Issues. Right.*

FH: And so I could respect that about her. But I appreciated having known her, and I could see the bond she had with Mr. Cannon, because they were on the same page in standing up for their community- Mr. Nathaniel Cannon.

DH: *Now, what do you think people will remember her for? If you could sum it up, Fred, in a few words, what thing or event or just her person would you think people will remember her for? You know.*

FH: I think people will remember her for her courage and her leadership and her bravery. Again, leading the NAACP at a time when people were still being murdered and beaten and thrown in jail, just for standing up for their rights.

And also for her faith in God, because I--, she probably would tell you if she was here now, that it wasn't her- it was the God, you know, inside of her that gave her the courage to do these things.

But just the, the irony of a woman, again, who, as I said, didn't raise her voice, didn't yell, didn't shout, didn't pound her fist, didn't stand up on tables. But yet, you know, she got so many people to follow her in getting people registered to vote; in getting people to stand up for improvements in their neighborhoods; in standing up against injustice, wherever it was. For her to accomplish all of that, in some ways, she kind of reminded me of pictures that you've seen and interviews of Ms. Rosa Parks.

DH: *Yes.*

FH: You know, the same kind of personality. When Ms. Parks spoke, you know, it wasn't with a loud voice or a shout, but just with that dignity that, you know, inspired other people to stay calm and fight racism and fight prejudice with your brain and your heart, instead of, you know, with your fists, and instead of ugly words or insults. That was never Mrs. Green.

So I think that's what she'll be remembered for- that sort of quiet, controlled leadership and courage. And you know, I'm sure there are many men who probably wish they had the courage that Mrs. Green had. She stood up against the odds when, you know, we had people who were blackballed, who were pretty

much run out of Tampa because they stood up for equal rights for black folk. I know there were some people in the education field who stood up and took those chances- same kind of chances Mrs. Green took.

So it took some courage. She could have just sat back and watched TV and, you know, gone along with the situation as it was, and said, Well, there's not much, you know, I can do about the way things are.

DH: Right.

FH: But she didn't do that, so I think that's what she's going to be remembered for.

DH: OK. Well, thank you, Mr. Hearn-- Fred Hearn-- for your words in this interview. And this concludes the interview, Ellen Green oral history collection project.

[END OF INTERVIEW]