

*Ellen Green Remembered*



**Hillsborough Remembers**

**Mayor Pam Iorio**  
by Priscilla Lakus  
August 14, 2007



*This an interview with Mayor of Tampa Pam Iorio. Pam Iorio met Mrs. Ellen Green during her lifetime, and wrote an article that included Mrs. Green's contributions to our community. This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, August the 14<sup>th</sup> of 2007, at Tampa City Hall. The interviewer, myself, is Priscilla Lakus, and I'm representing the City of Tampa-County Public Library system's oral history collection project.*

**Priscilla Lakus (PL):** *Good afternoon, Ms. Iorio. How are--? Oh, sorry, Mayor Iorio. How are you?*

**Mayor Pam Iorio (MI):** 'Pam' is fine. [Laughter]

**PL:** *I just want to know- you did get a chance to meet her during her lifetime, did you not?*

**MI:** I did. I'll tell you how it came about. When I was the Supervisor of Elections, I also was pursuing my master's degree at USF in history. And one area that I was focusing on was Tampa's civil rights history, and was following that path of my studies, that course of study.

Well, one of the points that I found very interesting was that when we read about our civil rights history, particularly in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, it's very male-oriented. And there are major male civil rights leaders that we all know and talk about in history. And I thought--, as I studied it a bit more, you came to the realization that the civil rights movement was really fueled by African-American women. And, and they're often not, not--

**PL:** *Recognized.*

**MI:** --recognized the way that they ought to be, like Fanny Lou Hamer, who, you know, just has a remarkable story, but you don't really read about her that much. But anyway, she's more on the national level.

So I thought, Well, perhaps what I would do is take a closer look at some women in Tampa who had real, you know, key-- excuse me just a moment; thank you-- who really had a real impact on Tampa's civil rights movement, but that you don't

read about them very often. And so I did a paper which turned into a published article, *They Stood Their Ground for Civil Rights: Florene Jones, Mary Alice Dorsett, and Ellen Green*. Now, Mary Alice Dorsett probably being the most--, best-known of the three. I interviewed each one of them.

So I'll never forget interviewing Ellen Green. I went to her home with my--, I guess my tape recorder; I don't remember that. Maybe I just took notes. Probably a tape recorder. But anyway, I went to her home in Port Tampa. And I spent a couple of hours with her. And I thought, What a remarkable lady. And she kind of walked me through her life history. She walked me through all of her, her accomplishments. But very unassuming, humble person. I mean, clearly, didn't have a puffed-up bone in her body. [Chuckle] I mean, she just--

*PL: I understand even her children didn't know of all her accomplishments.*

*MI:* That I can believe, because she was one of those--. And you know, all leaders have different styles. I mean, Mary Alice Dorsett: very real orator, commanding-presence-when-she-walked-into-a-room type of a person. Ellen Green: no. Not a commanding presence in that way. But always selected as the president of every organization, including the NAACP in the 1950s- the first woman president of the NAACP. Now, you don't get to be selected as president of every organization, unless people--, unless you exude some kind of leadership quality, which she did. And I could see with her- it was a--, this quiet confidence. You could see why people put her in charge of things.

Now, here's an interesting thing: After we finished our very lengthy talk-- and it was just really delightful; I really felt like I got to know her very well-- she said, "This is my favorite photo of me." And she took it off the wall. And it was her at a big-time banquet of some sort. I don't know if I can remember exactly-- I think it's in my article-- that it was maybe the NAACP banquet, or some large banquet, where she was in an apron.

And she, she was president of the organization, but the whole point of it was, is that I guess at some point during this major event, they needed help in the kitchen. And although she was the president of the organization and was running the whole show that night, she donned an apron, went to help, then forgot she had it on. So later, when they asked her to come up for something at the podium, she still had it on.

I thought that spoke volumes about her. And really, it speaks to how so many women had a quiet, but very critical influence on the civil rights movement. They were the organizers. They were the quiet leaders- maybe some not as quiet as others; everyone had their own personalities. But they got the voters registered. They are the ones that--. You know, for many who didn't want to register because they feared what that might lead to, they were the calming influence. They were the ones that organized the money-raising events. They were the

ones that got people to go door-to-door. They were natural organizers, and that was Ellen Green.

She didn't view herself as a leader. And I think that's a very important point about her. If you asked her-- and I asked her this-- "Do you see yourself as a major civil rights leader?" No. [Chuckle] She didn't see herself that way. I think she saw herself as a servant, as a person who should work at making life better for others. She saw a need. Surely there was a whole lot of I--, need, because there was a huge task of getting an entire population registered to vote, and then voting- and actually participating in the process. So I found her to be just an absolutely delightful, self-effacing, humble woman who did a whole lot of good in her lifetime.

*PL: One of her friends told me that she was very small in stature--*

*MI: Mm-hmm.*

*PL: --but she carried a big stick. [Laughter]*

*MI: Yes.*

*PL: And I've had other people tell me that she was very deeply religious, and that was the focus of her life- to--. There's just been all kinds of wonderful aspects about this lady. I wish I'd have been fortunate enough to have met her, but she passed away before I had a chance to meet her. But--. She was quite an outstanding person.*

*MI: She was. There's a point in here that I wanted to make. You know, she became the--. 1959: became president of the Tampa branch of the NAACP. But there was a particular point...*

*PL: 1966: president of the National Council of Negro Women.*

*MI: Correct. A position she held for sixteen years.*

*PL: Right. And then the YMCA, she had a, a role in that- in trying to establish that. The first black branch here in Tampa.*

*MI: Yeah. This, this is the point I wanted to make, right here, if it's OK.*

*PL: Certainly!*

*MI: [Pause] This is in this article: [Reading] "Green can remember the many indignities that you had to suffer, even as a little girl. Traveling with her mother by car and having to use the bathroom was a terrible experience. She remembers having to go by the side of the road in the bushes, where a snake*

might be, and do whatever you had to--, to do, and get back in the car and keep riding, with all the bathrooms that were there along the road. This emphasis on the larger struggle for human rights, the public dignity of black people as human beings, while immersed in day-to-day voter registration issues, represented a philosophical bond between these Tampa women and higher-profile black women activists in the South.”

You know, I think that Ellen Green was a very sensitive woman. She saw discrimination, experienced it firsthand. And she used the tools that she was given. She was given natural leadership abilities. She was given the--. And people were drawn to her. She saw the inequities, and she wanted to change. She wanted the world to change. And she used the skills that she had, which turned out to be very effective skills.

And so often in our history, it is more the fiery person. You know, even Fanny Lou, who--, Hamer, who I've referenced- she is known--. She's not as well-known as a Martin Luther King, but she is known, in part, because of a great orator that she was. And would even break out into song, and you know, just really captivated. Those tend to be the people in history that we really do remember, for obvious reasons.

But the point is, is that an Ellen Green is just, if not more so, significant. And it's often that quiet, methodical, caring, day-to-day work that, that really brings about progress. And I think she's responsible for a great deal of progress, and should be honored. There's no doubt in my mind that there should be a significant honor for her.

*PL: Do you know of any of the educational things that she tried to do? Because I heard that she helped with integration for the elementary school that--, within her neighborhood. I, I imagine it was Westshore Elementary; it's all I can think of. But did she help integrate that? And she had a lot of work with children, and evidently was affiliated some way-- and I'm not quite sure how-- with the University of South Florida. Do you know anything about that?*

**MI:** I may not be able to help you on those points. I was really focused much more on her registering people to vote, the sit-ins, the--, really her work with the civil rights.

*PL: Was she involved with the Walgreens sit-ins?*

**MI:** Yes, she was; in fact, I have a point of that in this article.

*PL: Woolworth.*

**MI:** Woolworth.

[Reading] “During year--, Green’s two-year tenure as president of the NAACP Youth Council, led by twenty-one-year-old Clarence Fort, brought the integration issue to a head by staging a lunchtime sit-in at the downtown Woolworth’s. Fort recalls that it was a frightening experience, having--, ordering the grits and eggs, and having white men come up to him and say--.”

I don’t want to repeat it, but it was in the article.

[Reading] “Green also participated in the sit-ins, along with her friend, Juanita Hall, who ordered her sandwich and ate, though she had ‘two tall white men standing over me.’”

And you know, Ellen Green was a small woman in stature, but she had that air of quiet confidence that did inspire people.

*PL: She had to have been quite a lady.*

*MI: Yes.*

*PL: Again, I only wish I would have met her- even just once.*

*MI: Right. I, I’m so glad that I was able to meet her. And she was very inspirational to me, and I’m glad you’re doing this oral history about her.*

*PL: Well, I’m glad that you’ve taken the time off of your very busy schedule to share your thoughts and some of the things that you wrote in your article with us. And this will go into our oral history of Ms. Ellen Green.*

*MI: Very good.*

*PL: So I thank you very, very much for your time.*

*MI: Thank you.*

[END OF INTERVIEW]