

Ellen Green Remembered



Hillsborough Remembers

Lucille Morris
by Priscilla Lakus
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This interview is with Ms. Lucille Morris. She is a friend of--, or was a friend of Mrs. Ellen Green, and she also has served as a past president of the National Council of Negro Women, which was also an organization that Ms. Green was affiliated with. Today's date is August the 6th of 2007, and this interview is taking place at the Seminole Heights Library. My name is Priscilla Lakus, and I'm representing the City of Tampa Public Library system's oral history collection project. And it's my honor now to converse with Ms. Lucille Morris.

Priscilla Lakus (PL): *Thank you, Ms. Morris, for coming this morning to meet with me. And I have just one question that I think might start our conversation going. And that is, How and where did you first meet Ms. Ellen Green?*

Lucille Morris (LM): First, I'd like to say thank you for inviting me to share what I know of Ms. Ellen Green as a member of the National Council of Negro Women. I met Ms. Ellen Green about thirty years ago when I joined the National Council of Negro Women, and she was president at that time. The National Council of Negro Women is a civic and community organization which was founded back in 1935 by the late Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune.

And because I am very familiar with Dr. Bethune as a graduate of Bethune-Cookman College and the interest that Ms. Green had in the council, which was founded by Dr. Bethune. Of course, we shared many interests, and I was delighted to be a part of her legacy in trying to continue the work of Dr. Bethune.

As I said, I met her about thirty years ago. She was president of the council at that time, and we met at the Tampa Urban League, which was a small group at that time. She took great pride in having served as the president for sixteen years. And she always made that known. She was very proud of that fact. And of course, who wouldn't be, if you have led ladies for sixteen years? [Laughter]

PL: [Laughter]

LM: We know what a challenge that can be. But she took it on, and she stood as tall as a giant. And--. But--. You didn't know her, but she was small in stature, but I always say, she carried a big stick.

PL: *[Laughter]*

LM: She was always polite. She was never out of character- I never saw her upset about anything. If she were, you would never know it. She was always polite, she was well-groomed, very dignified, proud, carried herself so stately even though she was so small. You would just have to marvel at her spunk, you know, if you'd watch her, because she was so proud. And you can imagine--.

This organization was founded in or organized in 1947, here in Tampa. And, you know, there were a lot of obstacles, I'm sure, that she had to go up against along with the group and the ladies and what have you, at that time. But she took it on; she took on the challenge. And I would say she did a remarkable job with the council. We're still carrying on the legacy, which she did not start, because it was started in 1947. And I did not read where she was a charter member.

But she surely must have come on shortly thereafter, or she may have been, because it was in 1977 that I became a member, although I knew and had heard about the council here in Tampa, as in many other communities. But I had not affiliated. And I felt so strongly about supporting until I said, Well, you know, it's really your time to come on board. And so that's where I began to work with Ms. Green very closely, and just carried on the work of the council as I knew Dr. Bethune had left us to do.

PL: *Well, I know that--. I remember very little, really, of the turbulent times that we had in the '60s. But I'm sure you were very active, as was Ms. Green, during those times. Can you recall some of the things and some of the changes that have taken place in this community-- in the Tampa Bay area-- after the '60s and prior to the '60s- how things were?*

LM: Well, as you're saying, it's nothing new. We've looked at many changes with what we may call "integration," if it is. And we can see that things have opened quite readily, but we can still question the changes there. But things like integration, I would say as far as education, social concerns, politics, and the norm--. So actually, we have just, like, filtered in and tried to move along in these endeavors, where we can, as they say, "Sit in!" [Chuckle]

PL: *Well, I'm sure that there have been many changes, and there's probably still a lot of work yet to do, but--*

LM: Exactly.

PL: --just the fact that, you know--. The earliest recollections that I have-- and I've lived in Tampa all my life-- is, as a child, there were restrictions for black people. There were water fountains that I never really quite figured out why some were colored and some were white, because the water was the same. And as a child, I was very curious about that. And no answers were given to me. It was just, "That's the way it is," was the answer. I'm sure you've gone through a lot of this and--, with your family. How did some of this affect your family and your friends during those times?

LM: During those turbulent years, as we are considering at that time--. Here again, because of your age, my age, we fell into that mode. And it was, it was a thing that we had to deal with- not that it was accepted, or we thought that it was right, or we thought it was good. But they were things that we had to endure, so to speak.

I was looking at a sportscast on yester--, last evening. And of course, they were talking about the changes in the football. And we know about Jackie Robinson and all those, all those people.

And so with us, I can only say that when we came along with the schools, we--, they were talking about how we () had to accept the hand-me-down textbooks, and how they were all marked up. And the teacher would say, "Erase the answers, and you do them, you know, for yourself." Those are things that were humiliating.

I'm originally from Gainesville, Florida, where the University of Florida is. And I was in walking distance from the University of Florida. And of course, we had our separate high school, and the, the whites had their high school. And here again, there was a little white girl, I guess, about my age. She would have to pass my house [Chuckle] to go to the white school, you know? But that's--, that was the way it was.

And we took the hand-me-down books, and we used them. And you know, we can laugh at that now and say we've overcome- even in spite of. And that's where we take great pride in having overcome.

Now, as far as the water fountains were concerned, you know, I laugh now, because when I was small--. And I would imagine a lot of the other African-Americans had to do the same thing. Before we would leave home, if we were going to town or wherever we were going, my mom would always say, "Make sure you go to the bathroom, because you know you can't go to the bathroom until you come back home." And so, you know, being a little girl, I'd go to the bathroom, and I understood that.

And if there was a water fountain, and you know, it had the signs on them. And I would look, and I--, she would say, "No, you can't drink--, no, you can't drink from

that. You have to wait until we get home. You can wait. You can wait.” And you know, so you see, you just--. I had to wait.

So when my children came along, I instilled the same values. You don't put yourself in a situation where you might be insulted or offended, because our parents were protective. And I was reared by an African-American minister. And of course, we were not into creating animosity or getting yourself in brawls, etcetera. And so I moved along without any problems.

And the same when we went to--, I went to Bethune-Cookman; it was in the early '50s. And of course, we could not go on the beach in Daytona. You could not go on the beach. And you know, these are things that are just coming up, as you're seeing. We were not allowed on the beach.

My husband was a student at that time. And we laugh about it now. If we went on the beach, you had to be in a car. And you would ride down the beach, but you had to be in constant motion. There was not any loitering or sitting out getting a sun tan or bathing in the ocean. So these are things--. No, we could not.

And I remember one time after we were adults, so to speak; we were graduates. And we went back on the beach. We were going to-- because things were supposed to be open-- the clubs. So we said, “Well, we're going on the beach. We're going to see what's going on here, where we--, we're not allowed. What's in there?” And so they always can come up with something at the door, you know, to deter you.

So it was three couples there. And I was leading the line, my husband in tow. And so they had the doorman--, man on the door to check your ID, etcetera. And I guess they noticed--. I may not have had anything in my hand. But they asked for my driver's license. And I did not have anything; I did not have my driver's license on--, in my person. And so they said, “Well, you have to show your driver's license.”

Well, that was a legitimate reason, so we did not try to put up a fuss or argument. We said, “Oh, OK!” And so we left. But that was just another reason or way of segregating, so to speak, even though things were supposed to be opening. But that was just an incident that just popped up.

And because I was in school there and talking about Daytona--. And I don't know anybody who has put more money in Daytona Beach than Mary McLeod Bethune, even after death. She went there in 1904; that's when she opened her school with five little girls, a dollar and a half, and the faith in God. I say the ground is hallowed [Pause] because it has sustained all these years. And now, on February 14th, '07, the school became a university. Isn't that marvelous?

PL: That's great. That's just great. What a great story.

LM: Isn't that marvelous? And, and you know, I'm sure--. We laugh now and say, you know, when the man sold her "the dump" for a dollar and a half, he thought he was, you know, just giving her something there to humiliate her and her cause. The KKK went on the campus to burn her down. Those are things that she endured before my time.

And these are stories told--, you know, that she would tell to the students as we attended. And they were--. The building there that we use was Curtis Hall, where the--. It's the girls' dorm. And she knew that they were coming on their horses, with their white sheet- whatever they wore over their heads, etcetera.

And so she was such a brave, strong, enduring lady. She was just God-fearing. It was just a calling, you know, that she was sent to start that school for girls.

And so when they came on the campus with their hoods-- that I should have said a moment ago-- she told one of the girls in the dorm to turn on the lights. And they ran and turned on the switch and turned on the floodlights in the yard. And she told one of--, called one of the names of the students that she knew was prayerful. She told her to lead them in prayer and to sing a spiritual. And she started singing Leaning on the Everlasting Arm. And the girls started singing and praying. And, and the KKKs turned around and, and left.

PL: [Gasp]

LM: An awesome story in many, many, but you know, I know I didn't come here to talk about Dr. Bethune and how she got started, which inspired Ms. Green. That's--

PL: I'm sure. That's what I was going to say- that it all comes in together, because she was an inspiration for Ms. Green.

LM: Yes. Exactly.

PL: Do you know of any stories that you can remember about Ms. Green herself that you can share with us?

LM: Ms. Green met Dr. Bethune here in Tampa. She shared that they became personal friends, and she took delight in that. Because Ms. Green was working at the Central Life Insurance Company at that time as a secretary, I believe. And Dr. Bethune had an office, as Ms. Green would share with me. Dr. Bethune had an office, as she would say, on the second floor. And she would often have lunch with Dr. Bethune.

PL: Oh, wow.

LM: So, you know, that just did something to her to just rub shoulders and eat lunch with her, you know, and talk with her. She learned so much about how to carry herself and how to be proud. I'm sure Ms. Green inherited all those things from her mother too, but to--, here's a lady who has founded a school now by the time she met Ms.--, Dr. Bethune. And here you are meeting someone who's done all these great things here right down the highway, right down the road, so to speak. And she is now someone who's very personal--, a personal friend, a personal touch to you.

And in 2005, my alumni, Bethune-Cookman College, hosted the national convention here in Tampa at the Doubletree. And we always try to have someone who knew Dr. Bethune personally, because we have a Mary McLeod Bethune breakfast. Or it would be a luncheon- one of the two. But I guess we're about to run out now, of people who really knew her personally.

PL: *Yeah. They're getting on.*

LM: Yeah! So I was able to ask Ms. Green, having known that she was just, she was--. Dr. Bethune was just her mentor. And she wanted to-- for lack of a better word-- wanted to emulate Dr. Bethune. For those of us who knew her, you know, it was so funny, because knowing Dr. Bethune like I did, and then seeing Ms. Green during the times--. She would wear a cape like Dr. Bethune.

PL: *[Laughter] ().*

LM: Yeah! She'd wear a cape, like Dr. Bethune! And she didn't mind saying, "Well, you know, Dr. Bethune always wore a cape." That was the way she expressed herself: "Well, you know..." You know, so proud, so tiny, but you know, chest out, shoulders back. "Well, you know, Dr. Bethune..."

PL: *[Chuckle] So did she speak for you at that?*

LM: Yes, she did. And she held the audience's attention for more than thirty minutes. And I was sitting there, saying, "Oh, my god. Oh, my god! You know. I've invited Ms. Green here. I don't [Chuckle] want here to turn the audience off," you know. But she was so involved, and she was so happy to bring us a message on behalf of Dr. Bethune. That was just her, that was just her love for the lady.

PL: *Mm-hmm. Well, that's certainly a part of her that I had not heard about. And it's been enjoyable to hear this. Did you have any other occasions where you had either some dealings, or some other anecdotes that you can remember about Mrs. Green?*

LM: I would just like to share that, during her administration, some of the things that were initiated during her sixteen years--. There was a need, as there still is and I'm sure always will be, to try and involve young girls-- young teenage girls-- to try and help them with self-esteem, moral character building, spiritual life. As you know--, all know well, Ms. Green was very spiritual- a Christian lady.

PL: *That I have heard.*

LM: And her values spilled over to everyone, although she didn't just wear Christianity on her sleeve, but she lived it. And so I would just like to inject that. And so she started the youth group, as we call it- the teenage youth group. And it's gratifying to know that many of the--. I would say the young girls at that time; of course they're very matured ladies now! And they have come back, and they want to give back to the girls. So that speaks volume for what she instilled in them. So her mission there was accomplished. Excuse me.

So she initiated the youth group. And sometimes, it sort of phases out with, with the section, as things will through the years. But we're trying to get back on board with that- you know, with trying to bring in our young teenage girls to be a part of the council. And they will hopefully grow into it as some of the matured ladies have.

And for fundraising, she initiated, as we call it, the Ms. National Council of Negro Women. And so you raise money, of course. [Chuckle] And the one with the highest amount of money was crowned Ms. NCNW, or Ms. National Council of Negro Women.

PL: *[Laughter]*

LM: And that was a means for providing funds for the community whenever African-American in the community had a crises or something, and the council could step in and lend a helping hand. And so that has been in and out, in and out, because nobody likes to raise money nowadays.

PL: *[Laughter]*

LM: But it was some of the things that she started, which, which everybody enjoyed. And it went on for many, many years. In fact, I take great pride in saying that in 1996, I am one of the Ms. NCNWs, for whatever that's worth--

PL: *[Laughter]*

LM: --as far as at that time, you know.

PL: *Yeah.*

LM: And of course, it's an honor to say that you served one year and you were Ms. NCNW, you know.

PL: *Wow, you collected money! A lot of that money. [Laughter]*

LM: Yeah, yeah! Exactly. For a good cause.

PL: *So it's something to be proud of.*

LM: Yeah, for a good cause. And during her administration, we had a lot of banquets. And of course, the banquets would have fashion shows, that they were big, you know, some time ago. I guess they sort of fizzle out and wear themselves out, you know. Folk get tired of fashions.

PL: *They just go in cycle.*

LM: Yeah. So that was big during her tenure. But even though--. Those are things that I can say I can relate to on a personal note. And there are a lot of other things, you know, that people have, you know, shared, but I would say that some of those were on a more national level. But she was just a phenomenal little lady, but so big, so big. And the council--. And as I said, she stood on the shoulders of those who came before her. And we are standing on her shoulders. And we take great pride in it.

And she was, she was a life member of the council- a charter member. And of course, what does "life" mean, you might say? It means that you have made a commitment that you really want to be involved with this cause for as long as you are physically and mentally able.

And I can truthfully say that she lived that part of her commitment. When she was not able to drive, you know, she would get someone to bring her to the meetings or something. Somebody would take her back and she would not get information sometimes if we were having a banquet or a luncheon, because we knew that she was failing and not able, you know.

But it--, when she would hear about it, she, she would really set you straight. She would call you and she would say-- and she was with her little self-- you know, she would say, "Well, why didn't I know about it?" You know, and you'd try to explain, "Well, Ms. Green, we understand--, and we know that--, and we didn't want--." "Well, that's not for you to say," you know.

PL: *[Gasp] [Laughter]*

LM: And we'd say, "Well, Ms. Green, we are so sorry. You know, we promise, you know, next time--." She would really be insulted, so to speak, because she wanted to do her part. And then she would say, "Well, how much for the tickets?"

PL: *[Laughter]*

LM: And that's the way she's, you know--. Very strong voice, very strong-willed. You know, it's like, Don't you try to determine what I can afford to do, you know. And we would say, "Well, they were--." "Well, I'm going to put your check in the mail. I'm getting you a check in the mail."

PL: *[Laughter]*

LM: And you know, there the check would come. And you know, we would feel, Oh my goodness, we () Ms. Green. She doesn't have to do this. You know, we don't want her to do this. She has really done all that she can do, and she contin--.

But as again, a life member: as long as you are physically and mentally able, you want to do, and you will do. And she believed in the cause. And she did it to the end.

PL: *She did. She sounds like a lady that casts a huge shadow.*

LM: Oh yes. And as I said, she carried a big stick.

PL: *[Laughter] I can only say I wish I would have had an opportunity to have met her. Even at the latter part of her life, I still would have really enjoyed a few moments of her time. But it wasn't to be.*

LM: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Yeah. You would have learned a lot. You would have been able to learn a lot just from listening to her- so sincere all the time, you know. And she took great pride in having been born and reared in Port Tampa. That was the love of her life.

PL: Yes.

LM: Port Tampa was the love of her life. In fact, she had asked me to write a letter-- which I did-- when her name came up to name the building out there in her honor, which I did. And she said--

PL: *The library, you're talking about?*

LM: I believe--. Not the Port Tampa one, where we were the other day.

PL: OK.

LM: It was the building out there on the corner. Well, is that a library?

PL: I don't know. There's a rec. center there close by. There's a--. There used to be a library- a small little building that was done away with, and now, the library is housed in what used to be the bank building. ().

LM: OK, well, it was the old building. It was an antique-looking building- on a corner, like.

PL: OK, that had to be the bank. And the bank has a name of the Port Tampa City Library. And they're not going to change the name of the library. But the inside-- the reading room-- is going to be dedicated to her.

LM: Right. Yeah, I was at that meeting.

PL: Yes.

LM: And you know, that was explained to those--

PL: Which is a very big honor, really.

LM: Yeah. Yeah. It is. We're pleased. And here again, here we go. OK?

PL: [Laughter]

LM: Here again, here we go! We're pleased, and we think that's a step, you know.

PL: Well--.

LM: We're, you know--. And I--. We are together; we understand! I was at the meeting. I was at that meeting at the library.

PL: I'm hoping that the University of South Florida, that she was affiliated with, also might find a way that they can, you know, give her some kind of recognition.

LM: That would be great!

PL: And that would be nice--

LM: That would be great.

PL: --because I understand that she had this other part of her life where she was an educator. And it would be nice if something could be done in those areas as well.

LM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

PL: But I think you've just given us some marvelous insight on Ms. Green, and I am so glad that you've taken the time to come.

LM: Well, I hope. I think I've probably given more of how she--, how her love for the council, if I might say--

PL: But that's an important part of her life as well.

LM: Right, right.

PL: We're looking at all these different facets that she had. She had so many. So each time, we learn a little bit more about the lady, and we get a better picture of her- a complete picture of her. If you have anything else you want to say, you can give us your final parting statements.

LM: Well, may I add one last thing, if I might?

PL: Certainly.

LM: And that is that the organization the National Council of Negro Women--. And you've heard me mention Dr. Bethune, which was founded in 1935. And her mission was to bring women together of different educational values and organizations and groups to meet as one organization, which is the National Council of Negro Women. And by bringing all of these women together with their ideas and their values and their expertise, to speak as one. You follow?

PL: Mm-hmm.

LM: And so that was filtered down to the local chapter here. And so here in 1947, when it was founded, this group saw the need to bring ladies locally together to speak as one body. So I think that's important as far as how Ms. Green is carrying on the legacy of Dr. Bethune by bringing all of these ladies- professional women; housewives; whoever has a concern, issue, and would like to work for the betterment of the community.

PL: That's wonderful. Well, I think all you ladies have done a marvelous job, and have had, well, just wonderful inspirations from people before you. And you've done a very, very good job, and we're very proud of you.

LM: Thank you.

PL: And I again want to thank you for taking the time to come and visit with me and share these thoughts with me on Ms. Green. And I appreciate it very much. Thank you.

LM: It's a pleasure to share. It's a pleasure to share- and know, you know, that you're interested in her life as a founder-- not a founder, but as a lifelong member-- of the Port Tampa community, and what she has done for the city of Tampa.

[END OF INTERVIEW]