

Synopsis of June 1995 Interview with Leona Spencer (#30)

Leona Spencer's life is a woven tapestry of tireless community service. Through hard work and persistence, she advocated to improve the lives of others, especially the poor and disadvantaged, through her networking, mentoring and persuading others to donate funds or to volunteer their time.

Growing up in a large family of 11 children, Leona shared a common bond with those struggling in poverty. She discovered early how single mothers in particular struggle with life after her father passed away at age 8, leaving her widowed mother to rely on others to keep the household going.

While living on James Street on the city's Southeast Side, Leona attended Henry Elementary School. She recalls landing her first job at age 12 when she earned \$5 a week during that summer cooking, cleaning and helping at the Richard Gillette family household. She remembers him picking her up each morning at 7:30 a.m. six days a week, in a convertible so she could begin her chores.

Throughout high school, she continued to work but when it came time to graduate from Central High School in 1945, she recalls borrowing a white dress because she didn't have enough money to buy one. There were no African American teachers in school that might have encouraged her to further her education after high school, she recalls, but she persisted. To pay her way, she attended Grand Rapids Community for one semester and then would take off the next semester to earn money.

In September 1948, she married Ed, a pattern maker at General Motors. Both 21, they embarked on a life together raising their three children, Toni, Diana and Edward while Leona became very involved in the community.

Leona became the first teacher at Methodist Community House in 1955 where she recruited many African American men to mentor children. Later, while president of the Grand Rapids Association for Nursery Education, she visited countless daycare centers in the community, trying to convince them to open their doors to African American children.

She also got involved with the Concerned Citizens' Council in Grand Rapids, an African American organization that fought racism and helped lift the welfare of children. While a youth minister at First Community AME Church, she tried to overcome discrimination in the school system by recruiting tutors to help African-American students with their high school studies so they could pass competency tests and graduate. Completing their education remains a challenge for many students of color even today, she says.

In the mid-1960s, while she and her husband were looking for a new house in a nicer neighborhood, Realtors refused to show them an attractive home they spotted on Meadow Lane in a white neighborhood. Eventually, Leona and Ed joined a group of other African American couples who were tired of facing the same racist hostility and built homes in a new

development called Auburn Hills, a Northeast Side parcel of land purchased by four African American men.

Leona graduated from Grand Valley State University and achieved her goal of becoming a social worker. She retired in 1985 as a supervisor for volunteer services at the Kent County Department of Social Services after witnessing some progress being made by African Americans in their struggle against discrimination. But by 1995, when she was interviewed for this oral history, she said she felt those advancements slipping into "deep trouble."

Her passion for helping others was frequently recognized through awards, including Grand Rapids Community College's Giant among Giants award and the Governor's Service Award for her directorship of the Kent County Department of Social Services' Youth Companion program. She was also named a distinguished alumna of GVSU. National awards included the Sojourner Truth Award for Meritorious Service.

Leona passed away in October 19, 2013 at the age of 86. To learn more about her life, read her biography "Woman of Commitment and Action" by Joann M. Davis which is available at the Detroit Public Library (Burton Historical Collection) and the State of Michigan Library.

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