

When I first came to the University of Northern Iowa in the fall of 1995 as the new Director for Multicultural Education, my vice president approached me with an important request. She asserted that if there was one person I needed to meet early in my tenure, that individual was Anna Mae Weems! Being a little petulant, mildly rebellious, and upset with a directive from my supervisor, I resisted for a while. I was encouraged to attend the Urban Potential program on race relations that Weems had brought to the Cedar Valley. I was not fond of Vivian and shuddered at the idea that I needed to attend anything!

Eventually, I met Weems within the first month when my supervisor escorted her to my office. I became aware of why they were pushing her upon me. She was a firebrand as far as her drive to improve the lives of Blacks in the community—an endeavor central to my aspirations. Weems was quick in dialogue, revealing wisdom from decades of experience. I was glad to meet her, but my dissatisfaction with Vivian continued to dissuade me from participating in his workshop.

Anna Marie Weems was born in Waterloo, Iowa, on February 6, 1926. She was reared by her father, for her mother had died during childbirth. In his absence as a traveling salesman and musician, Weems was reared by extended family members. She developed a feisty demeanor and would not allow others to exploit her because she recognized racism at an early age through vicarious and, eventually, personal experiences. Her vibrant personality developed as a type of defense mechanism against unfathomable bigotry, bile, and



SoulTown Photo

Anna Mae Weems was featured on the March - April Issue of The SoulTown Magazine: Women's History Month 2019.

brutality.

Her concern was as much outgoing as it was incoming. She was clearheaded about the evil of racism and dedicated herself to thwart, confront, and extirpate it from our society. She was motivated to relieve people of their pain and suffering from racially discriminatory practices. She sought to change their perspective from victimization to realizing their dignity and worth as children of God by holding people accountable for their superiority complexes and responsibility for their exploitation of others based on

skin color.

Arguably, the most standout action associated with Weems was her bold invitation to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to come to Waterloo. King responded favorably.

With assistance from Harris Wofford, the American Friends Service Committee, and other sponsors, King visited the Cedar Valley in April 1959. He came soon after visiting India, the country of his hero, Mahatma Gandhi, from February 9 to March 10. To have the young leader of the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 in a bastion

IN MEMORIAM: ANNA MAE WEEMS



Rev. Michael D. Blackwell Ph.D.
• Social Ethicist •

Born in Philadelphia and raised in CT during the classic Civil Rights era of the 1960s. He was profoundly affected by the life, thought, and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is published in African American religious thought, peacemaking, the nonviolent direct action of Dr. King, community building, and social change. He worked for twenty years as Director for Multicultural Education at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in Cedar Falls as the Director for the Center for Multicultural Education and served as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Philosophy and World Religions. Currently, he is retired and is the founding President and Executive Director of the nonprofit, Project for the Beloved Community, Inc. mdblackwell@gmail.com
BLOG: mdblackwell.com

of racism in the Midwest was a significant coup and memorable event.

Another vital accomplishment Weems achieved was fighting against and often defeating unemployment and underemployment by the ubiquitous wielders of racist hiring practices.

She did not shy away from difficult conversations with employers for their dastardly and objectionable defiance of equitable standards of conduct. She was not afraid to call them out publicly and to encourage protests, demonstrations, and boycotts to accomplish her goal of justice for job seekers and those deserving of promotion. No wonder she became the first Black woman director of the Iowa Workforce Center!

Weems's interest in improving labor relations led her to go to Memphis, Tennessee, a couple of weeks before King

was assassinated. Like him, she came to support the strike of the overwhelmingly Black sanitation workers suffering from low wages and poor working conditions.

While others became seriously demoralized by King's murder, Weems did not despair. She persevered in continuing her efforts to shine a light on the perniciousness, obstinacy, and irrationality of racism. She suffered from threats to her safety but pressed onward despite the sacrifice(s).

Anna Mae Weems was an icon, a pioneer, and an inspiration to many. Her countless efforts to abolish the inveterate and intricate system of racial, sociocultural, political, and economic injustice.

On one occasion, upon hearing that the district's Department of Correctional Services had asked me to be a consultant on dismantling racist processes in probation and parole, she balked at the request. She thought I was too cerebral and inexperienced in the trenches. I learned of her disapproval from others. But that was Weems: speaking her mind unflinchingly and believing herself better equipped for the task. Perhaps, in one sense, she was right!

All in all, Weems was an impassioned seeker of right, fairness, and equality. Over time, we had become more than cordial: we were partners in the journey towards freedom. She died at 98 on September 22, 2024. For her fortitude, boldness, stick-to-itiveness, and compassion, let us celebrate her legacy by continuing her righteous pursuits!

I am Dr. Michael Blackwell, the Social Ethicist for The SoulTown Magazine. I want to thank Anna Mae Weems for having SOUL! ☺