

Young African-American Women Leaders

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On November 20, 2009 when Oprah Winfrey announced that she was ending her award-winning talk show, media outlets discussed who would be best suited to fill the daytime television top spot that Oprah had held for nearly 25 years. Oprah's talk show was slated to air for the final time in September 2011. The hole her departure would create was already being felt.

Less than a year later, more change impacted the rank of African-American women leaders. This change brought the passing of a long time Civil Rights and women's activist. Like Oprah, Dr. Dorothy Height has touched the lives and helped to empower countless women. When Dr. Dorothy Height, founder of the National Council of Negro Women and a pioneer who conferred with national and international leaders including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, passed away on April 20, 2010, the "going home" seemed to leave another gap in leadership among African-American women.

However, upon closer examination -- and as with generations past -- one will discover that young African-American women are continuing to step forward to lead causes, businesses, and community initiatives. These women might not have their pictures and names splashed across mainstream magazines, newspapers and Web sites. Yet, their contributions to the human landscape are undeniable.

The political arena is an area where African-American women have served boldly since Shirley Chisholm first served as Congresswoman of New York. For a first glance, the Center for American Women and Politics reports that 12 of the 90 women who serve in Congress are African-American. Additionally, 234 of the 1,814 women legislators serving at national levels are African-American.

Although progress has been made over the years, when it comes to representation, these numbers show that much more work remains to be done. Laura Richardson (California), Donna Edwards (Maryland), and Yvette Clark (New York) are leading the way.

Thirty-seven year old Laura Richardson serves California's 37th district. Congresswoman Richardson won a seat in the state legislature in 2006. She soon became the first African-American woman to serve as the Assistant Speaker Pro Tem. She has also spearheaded transportation and health and human services initiatives. Currently, she serves on the House Committees on Transportation & Infrastructure and Homeland Security.

Prior to entering politics, Richardson worked at Xerox Corporation and is a graduate of UCLA. Helping citizens of the 37th district to gain employment and raising the region's poverty level are key areas that she continues to focus on.

Donna Edwards focuses on job growth and economic recovery. The 52 year-old Congresswoman became the first African-American woman to represent Maryland when she was sworn into office (replacing 15-year incumbent Albert Wynn) on June 19, 2008.

Following the earthquake in Haiti, Edwards traveled to the Caribbean island as part of a United States Congressional delegation and offered her support to Haiti's President Rene Preval and the people of Haiti as they worked to rebuild their country. And in an effort to restore the state that she serves, on June 12, 2009 Congresswoman Edwards approved Maryland's Drug Overdose Reduction Act of 2009. About the signing of the Act, Congresswoman Edwards had this to say in her June 2009 announcement, "It is my hope that the Drug Overdose Reduction Act of 2009 will help combat a growing public health crisis that is going largely unnoticed in our country. More than 20,000 Americans die each year by accidental overdose. This is a nationwide crisis. 694 people died in Maryland from drug-induced causes in 2005 alone. Sadly, many of these deaths were preventable. It is time the federal government plays a role in helping to address this severe public health crisis."

Funding for the initiative will create grant programs aimed at reducing deaths related to drug overdoses. The Act will also help create statewide commissions that will study recent increases in drug overdoses and the effectiveness of existing programs to reduce or eliminate overdoses.

Brooklyn-born Congresswoman Yvette Clark was elected to Congress in 2006. She was 41 years old at the time. Since her election, the Brooklyn native has tackled affordable housing, education, energy and environment, health care reform, and small business initiatives. Bills she has signed in an effort to find viable solutions to the housing challenge include the National Homelessness Task Force Act of 2007, the Fairness for Homeowners Act, Supportive Housing for the Elderly, and the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund Act of 2007. When asked about her role as a public servant, Clark told Elaine Bryan of South Florida Caribbean News, "Now as a member of Congress, representing the 11th Congressional District of New York, I am committed to continuing the district's legacy of excellence as set forth by the late Honorable Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American woman and Caribbean-American elected to Congress."

Politics aside, the numbers of African-American women under the age of 55 who are stepping into pioneering roles or who are finding new ways to complete "what must be done" are rising. The arts and entertainment industry is one where younger women are charting their own course. Many of these women are leveling the playing field, thanks to the global (and instant) influence of the Internet.

Twenty-four year old Felicia Brown launched her talk show "Youth Talk" when she was only 14 years old. Her mother worked at a local television station in Cincinnati, Ohio. She pulled Felicia into the studio with her one day and began to show her how to produce her own shows. That was all it took; Felicia was hooked.

During her 10-year career in television, Felicia Brown has interviewed guests such as Maya Angelou, Rev. Joel Osteen, Marvin Sapp, B. B. King, and rapper Common. Former Essence magazine senior editor, Susan Taylor, remains one of Felicia's heroines and inspirational figures. She is also inspired by the work of Tyra Banks and Oprah Winfrey.

Brown is one of 100 graduate journalism students chosen to participate in the New York International Radio and Television Society's Career Workshop. She has worked as a reporter for the Cincinnati Herald and as a production assistant and reporter for WLWT-TV. When asked what her primary role is, Felicia exclaims that she is a "youth advocate." Her talk show spotlights youth who make positive life choices. Felicia also shares concerns and challenges that youth convey to her when she meets with political and social leaders during feature interviews and other public forms of discourse.

Nachelle Gordon steps in where some fear to tread. In 2005 she co-founded the Young Black Women's Society (YBWS). At the organization's official Web site, one of the purposes of the organization is stated, "to develop YBWS' members for effective leadership."

Programs that YBWS offer its growing membership include Civic Engagement (a community service focused program that prepares young women to go out and empower their neighborhoods through education and healthy lifestyles) and ACCESS (a mentoring program that pairs youth with established business, social, and academic leaders).

Other programs that YBWS offer are Future Leaders by Design. The program targets 14-18 year old girls and teaches them how to set goals, have healthy self-esteem, and become empowered through a collective voice. The organization's Professional and Personal Development program teaches young women how to map out and prepare for their career. Workshops, seminars, and networking events are provided through the program.

Just 27 years-old, Gordon is a former Boston Public School teacher. She is also a keynote speaker who has appeared at conferences and seminars around the country. Regarding education, she told Ethnic Online in its December 2009/February 2010 issue, "I think that once we get to a place where everyone says, 'it's my responsibility to get these kids off to college', once we do that as a community I think that's when we will start to see change."

Black History Makers

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