

WOMENS HISTORY PROFILE

MARILYN HOLIFIELD

BREAKING BARRIERS IN THE FIELD OF LAW

By Sandra J. Charite

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Marilyn Holifield can remember the day her mother came home and told her about listening to an amazing civil rights lawyer and activist arguing about school desegregation at the Tallahassee courthouse.

The attorney, Constance Baker Motley, did not win the case at trial but she did so on appeal — and her success paved the way for Holifield to attend the then racially segregated Leon Senior High School.

It also helped put Holifield on a path that would lead to a highly successful career as an attorney, breaking racial barriers and winning respect and praise from her colleagues.

"She is a leader beyond reproach and she successfully balances numerous competing professional demands as one of the best lawyers in her field," said Kendall-based attorney Cynthia Everett.

"Not only has she paved the way for others; she has pulled others along with her. When wise counsel is needed on any range of matters, she is at the top of my list," Everett said.

Tallahassee-born Holifield, a litigator with Holland & Knight in Miami,

began her education at N. B. Young Nursery School at Florida A&M University. In an era when racism and hatred were rampant in the South, she had the good fortune to live just three blocks from FAMU.

EVIL OF SEGREGATION

"We were protected from the evil of segregation, discrimination and racial hatred because we did not come in contact with the people who perpetrated racial hatred," Holifield said. "I never really saw White people. We had a lot of opportunities and programs that we were able to participate in at the university."

In her junior year of high school, Holifield transferred to Leon High in 1963, one of the first three Black students to attend the all-White Leon High.

She graduated with a passion for the piano and swimming and a desire to become a writer or a poet. But when she enrolled in the private, independent liberal arts-oriented Swarthmore College in Philadelphia. It was to study economics, graduating in 1969 with a bachelor's in economics.

"But I was an artistic person," said Holifield.

"I liked analysis and theory and economics involves a great deal of analysis and theory," she said. Her brother, Edward, now a cardiologist, also had majored in economics at a nearby college, Franklin & Marshall.

Holifield had applied to law school in her senior year of college.

Her elder brother, Bishop Jr., then a student at Harvard law school with a strong passion to become a lawyer, encouraged her to follow suit. She did so the September after she received her bachelor's degree but her real inspiration was remembering her mother talking about Motley and how passionate she was about her work.

Holifield graduated from Harvard in 1972 with a law degree.

Years later, she met Motley, then a judge for the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, on a number of occasions.

Motley was "gracious and delighted to be complimented in that way" when Holifield told her how much of an influence she had in her decision to pursue her career in law.

Also drawing inspiration from Motley, Holifield began her legal career working for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in New York City, where she spent five years. She then returned to Florida expecting to help with family businesses but she was offered a job as general counsel with the New York State Division for Youth to work for Peter Edelman, husband of children's rights activist Marian Wright Edelman.

VERY ISOLATED

Holifield spent a year on that job and then served as a judicial law clerk for the late Appellate Judge Paul Roney in St Petersburg, also for a year. She then joined Holland & Knight's Tampa office in 1981 as an associate, the first Black attorney to work at the firm.

It was a challenging job.

"I was very isolated," she said. "I think people were reluctant to interact with me. People really did not know how to find a place for me... It was difficult to penetrate the corporate arena of Tampa and it was difficult to penetrate Holland & Knight in Tampa,"



Attorney Marilyn Holifield and Michelle Obama attend a fundraiser at Jungle Island on July 23, 2008, when Barack Obama was campaigning for the presidency.

—Photo courtesy of Marilyn Holifield

Holifield said in a 2003 in the *Minority Law Journal*.

Subsequently, Chesterfield Smith invited her to transfer to Holland & Knight's Miami office.

An important career opportunity opened up when the late Chesterfield Smith, a founder of Holland & Knight who had recruited her for the firm, picked Holifield to make a presentation for a Fortune 500 company about the use of a "poison pill" strategy to protect it from a hostile take over.

"Prior to that time, there were very few opportunities for Black women," said Holifield.

Her presentation was a hit that resonated in the corporate world.

Holifield made history again in 1986 when she was named a partner with Holland & Knight, the first Black woman partner with a major law firm in Florida.

ROLE MODEL PARENTS

Holifield attributes her success to her parents, who were her role models.

Her mother, Millicent Holifield, who died in April 23, 2003, had established the licensed practical nursing program for Black students in Leon County. Her father Bishop Holifield Sr., who died in Jan 31, 1998, had been the first Black soil conservationist in Florida with the United States Department of Agriculture. His job required him to advise both Black and White farmers about federal programs available through the department.

Their resilience and contributions to society were a lesson for their three children to "never accept limitations in what you do."

Holifield regrets they were not alive to see the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

"This is a great time in America," she said.

Still, America's current economic problems worry Holifield, who is concerned about the impact on youth.

"It is sad that young people are working hard and going to school but are unable to find a job," she said. "I am looking forward to seeing the country recover from the economic downturn and for young people to be able to have more opportunities."

Her message to them is to not give up.

"Sometimes, there are far more opportunities out there than really meets the eye," she said.

OPPORTUNITIES IN LIFE

Holifield, who lives in Coral Gables, is married to businessman Marvin Holloway. She has two stepdaughters, Camara, an assistant professor at the University of Delaware, and Kandia, a lecturer at Princeton University and a freelance

writer.

Holifield is a member of the executive committee of the Harvard Alumni Association Board of Directors and is at-large director of the Harvard Club of Miami.

She also serves on the Board of Trustees of the University of Miami and is a member of the American Law Institute, the Academy of Florida Management Attorneys, the International Association of Defense Counsel and the Litigation Counsel of America.

When she is not reading depositions or litigating a case, she enjoys going to art galleries and bookstores and traveling to Europe, Africa and Asia. She has windsurfed in places in Hawaii, and parts of the Caribbean.

"I have been extremely fortunate," she said. "I am grateful for the opportunities that I have had in life. I enjoy my life and what I do."