



The multifaceted Lee served her community as a teacher, school administrator, attorney, delegate, civic activist and political campaigner.

Her Spirit Moves Many

BETTY LYNNE LEARY

A representative to the House of Delegates for 16 years, Lena K. Lee now inspires a younger generation of public servants.

Growing up in Alabama in the early 1900s, Lena K. Lee '51 lived the segregated life of a young black girl. Separate schools, separate bathrooms, separate lives defined her existence. She learned a no-nonsense approach to life early on—be tough, be thorough, be prepared. These traits would serve Lee well later in life as one of the first black graduates of the University of Maryland School of Law. As one of the School's oldest living graduates, Lee tells the story of how a young woman from the Deep South landed in Maryland to become not only a schoolteacher and administrator but also the state's first black female lawyer to serve in the General Assembly.

"It was forced on me to become a teacher because my father was determined that all his children would finish

college," Lee explains in a strong, steady voice. "He said it would help fight Jim Crowism, promote quality products and extend our race."

While her mother stayed home to raise the children, Lee's father worked as a coal miner, yearning for the day when his children would receive the same opportunities for education as white children. Lee's older sister finished high school then married, while her brother went on to college.

"My mother lived to see my brother become a doctor but my father died much earlier," Lee recalls. "But my father left that promise with us, and we saw to it that my brother became a doctor. We got it done." Lee left home to attend the Cheyney Training School for Teachers (now Cheyney University) outside Philadelphia, where she earned her teaching certificate in

1927. When a teacher fell ill in Annapolis and the school needed a replacement quickly, Lee landed her first job.

"It was a lucky strike for me, very lucky," she asserts. "My application was already in, and I came from a very reputable school." Lee began her teaching career at Stanton Elementary School then four years later moved to the Robert Brown Elliot School #104 in west Baltimore. She served in the public school system for 20 years, advancing into administrative positions and eventually serving as principal of PS #104. She describes the progression as rewarding but not always welcomed by her local peers.

"I was a hard worker, but I was an outsider," Lee says. "People had prejudices. In those days, you caught hell if you weren't from Baltimore or Coppin." Lee kept her father's dream alive as she went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Morgan State College (now University) and a master's degree from New York University. She married Robert Lee in 1941 and, at his urging, decided to enter law school. The School of Law began admitting blacks into its programs in 1935, and Lee received her *juris doctor* degree in 1951.

"Law school was thrilling, something new, but studying to be a teacher and studying law were a world apart," Lee relates. She accepted a position with Nicholas & Goznell and began a career that included not only a law practice but also a variety of civic work and political campaigning for friends.

"I helped everybody else get elected, then someone drafted me to be on a ticket," she says, laughing. In 1967, at age 60, she became the first black female lawyer elected to the House of Delegates. Education issues were always close to her heart as she tackled overcrowded schools, shabby buildings and outdated materials.

"Reducing the size of classes was a legal enactment, and we required teachers to have four years of training instead of two," she notes. "The laws we created did affect the quality of education."

It would be more than 30 years after Lee's first term before the second black

female attorney would follow in her footsteps in the General Assembly. Lisa Gladden '91 was elected in 1998, and she met her predecessor recently over lunch. Gladden was, in her words, awestruck.

"Even at 95, Mrs. Lee is clear and strong," Gladden says. "Her vision is very clear about what Baltimore needs." Gladden notes that while her experiences in Annapolis differ greatly from Lee's, they both relish the honor of serving.

"We have this awesome responsibility to take care of Baltimore City and the people who need our help most," Gladden explains, "the young, the poor, the undereducated." She adds that when Lee served in the legislature, there were no specialty groups such as the black or women's caucuses.

"Before Lena Lee, there was no unified voice for specialty groups. She helped create them," Gladden notes. "I want to be

"I did domestic problems, contract cases and I had some good criminal cases," she explains. "Contract law is the trickiest because the law is forever changing. If you don't know it, you can hurt people." Lee found criminal law much more fascinating. She recalls one case where her client had killed a man who was breaking into his home; she won the case with her gripping oratory and legal skills.

"We claimed self-defense and the jury let him off. The judge was furious," she recalls with a slight chuckle. "He said I came into his court, turned it into a Wild West show and that his court deserved more dignity. That was fun."

Lee's days are much quieter now although she still keeps a hand in politics by serving as a mentor to young legislators like Gladden. She enjoys meeting young people to discuss campaign strategies and current legislative issues. While she realizes that pol-

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—DELEGATE PETE RAWLINGS

like her a lot. She's tough as nails and so am I, but she's a lot more no-nonsense."

Delegate Pete Rawlings worked with Lee in creating the black caucus in 1970 and says that her fellow lawmakers regarded her as a woman of great integrity.

"When she took the floor, she was like E.F. Hutton," Rawlings remembers. "Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen. She never wasted words, she was very clear, and she spoke out on what was unfair to the African-American community."

Lee served in Annapolis for 16 years when her physician informed her that at age 76, her demanding schedule of meetings, travel, campaigning, civic work and practicing law was taking a toll. She left the General Assembly and devoted herself to her practice full-time.

itics have changed considerably since the days when she used a mimeograph machine to print campaign literature and enlisted the help of neighborhood children to distribute it on weekends, she shares freely her experiences, openly her knowledge, and candidly her opinions.

"I do what I can," she says. "I'll endorse candidates, give contributions or hold committee meetings at my house. I'll go wherever they drive me although I don't give as many speeches now." And with the same, straightforward approach to the facts that she has embraced her entire life, she quips, "Look, I'm going on 96. I don't keep up like I used to. It's a different ballgame now. But I can still get them in the spirit." ■