



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1983

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NAACP Gives 67th Spingarn Medal to Dr. Benjamin E. Mays

He had to be helped on stage and then sat in a wheelchair. And when he was brought to stand at the mike, his once straight and magnificent figure was bent, the voice quavered. But the dark eyes still burned with fierce fires of grit and determination.

Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, internationally renowned educator, theologian, humanitarian, author, who would become 88 years old on August 1, was on stage in July, at the NAACP's 73rd Annual Convention to become the 67th recipient of the Association's highest and most prestigious award, the Spingarn Medal. Although the NAACP makes this award annually "for the highest achievement" of a black American in the preceding year or years, it was clear to the knowing that Dr. Mays was chosen for his unswerving and inspiring commitment to the uplift of blacks and his steadfast stance against bigotry, ignorance and oppression, over a lifetime of unrelenting struggle.

Introduced by former U.S. Senator Edward W. Brooke, who praised the recipient for his "enduring and uncompromising advocacy of human and civil rights," Dr. Mays declared:

"I may not deserve this great honor, but it is an honor I cannot pass up."

His speech was laced with references to the black church and black school, two institutions through which he has sought to prepare blacks for higher levels of participation in the American spiritual and economic society.

His speech was also filled with references to poetry and he recited several, including one of his most favorite: "God's Minute":

I have only just a minute
Only sixty seconds in it
Forced upon me—can't refuse it
Didn't seek it, didn't choose it,
But it's up to me to use it.
I must suffer if I lose it,
Give account if I abuse it,
Just a tiny little minute—
But eternity is in it.

Dr. Mays was the youngest of eight children born in 1894 to ex-slaves Hezekiah and Louvenia Mays who were sharecroppers in South Carolina. He was 19 years old before he was privileged to spend a full term in school, was 52 years old before he voted for the first time and was already 60 by the time the 1954 Supreme Court decision, that began a slow and very tortuous desegregation of the nation's schools, became the law of the land.

Early he learned the value of hard work towards a predetermined goal. For he had determined early that he would be educated. In fact he went into the woods after hitching his mule to a tree, and literally "prayed myself into education."

He cleaned outhouses to finance his high school education, waited

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tables and tended furnaces to get through Bates College in Maine, and worked as a pullman porter to pay for his master's degree and Doctorate of Divinity from the University of Chicago.

He has inspired hundreds upon hundreds of young blacks, including the late Dr. Martin L. King, Jr., in his long-held position as president of Morehouse College, from which he recently retired as president emeritus. He also retired as president, the first black elected to that position, of the Atlanta Board of Education. His lifetime of work in civil and human rights has included work with the national YMCA, the Urban League, the NAACP and with other organizations too numerous to mention.

He has once said: "Ours is an ongoing struggle, freedom is something that has to be fought for and won by every generation. You can't stop with one war and think it is over.

"We have made some great gains. But we haven't gained to the extent that opportunities for blacks are as great as they are for whites. It's still true that a white boy with a high school education can get as far as a black man with a college degree. A white with (an undergraduate) college degree can get as far as a black with a master's, and a white with the master's can get as far as a black with a Ph.D.

"It must be kept in mind that tragedy of life does not lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy is having no goal to reach. It is not a calamity to die with a dream unfulfilled. It is a calamity to never have dreamed."

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