

# Sculpture celebrates lifetime of activism

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“Just about anything you can think of as far as goodness is concerned, she’s been involved in,” says one friend.

By Donna Alvis-Banks  
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CHRISTIANSBURG -- Nannie Berger Hairston came into this world “colored.”

It was a description she accepted gracefully.

“One thing about life,” the now-85-year-old Hairston said, “you have to know where your place is. You see, some people try to fix something and they don’t know how.”

Hairston learned how.

She learned from her father, a West Virginia coal miner, and from her mother, a woman with a fourth-grade education who raised 10 children to value the three K’s: knowledge, kindness and kinship.

That’s why, in 1985, Hairston knew what to do when she and her husband, John, went to Bristol as representatives of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to witness a march of the Ku Klux Klan.

“When you’re doing something,” she said, remembering the event, “you have to have faith and not fear.”

So Hairston approached a man handing out KKK applications and asked for one. She wanted to know for herself the exact words attracting people to the organization that hated her race.

She still has the KKK application in one of her many scrapbooks spanning a lifetime of active participation in the civil rights movement.

“If you are for a purely white America,” it reads, “if you are against Communist-inspired race mixing, if you are a true Patriot, join today!”

That march of the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Hairston remembers, happened without incident.

“My parents always taught us that you can’t fight hate with nothing but love,” she said. “If you can get along well with your family, you can carry that beyond to the church, to the community.”

Hairston settled in Christiansburg in 1953 after the mines closed in McDowell County, West Virginia. She moved her parents with her, and she and John raised four daughters in the house where they still live just off U.S. 460. Her mother, 103-year-old Bessie Berger, also lives nearby.

The Hairstons carried their love through family -- “Family is always first,” Nannie insists -- and through their church,



Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

Cameron Kenley (left) and Ralph Johnston of McCoy Memorials Inc. of Blacksburg mount the Nanny B. Hairston bust in the Montgomery County office building



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Nannie Berger Hairston.

Schaeffer Memorial Baptist Church. They also carried it through involvement in many community organizations, most visibly the Montgomery-Floyd County NAACP chapter.

With her years of dedicated service, Hairston found a place in the hearts of many local people.

On Saturday, she'll have a place of honor in Christiansburg when a sculpture of her is unveiled.

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Sculptor Larry Bechtel.

The bronze bust -- created by local sculptor Larry Bechtel -- will be the first to grace the lobby of the Montgomery County Government Center.

Bechtel first met Hairston when he took a notion to do a sculpture of Capt. Charles S. Schaeffer, a 19th-century civil rights pioneer for whom Hairston's church is named.

He called Hairston and agreed to meet her at the church so she could show him a large portrait of Schaeffer that hangs in the sanctuary.

When he arrived, Hairston led him to the portrait and started laughing when she saw his reaction.

"I said, 'Wow, he's white!'" Bechtel recalled. "She got a big kick out of that."

Bechtel did complete a bronze bust of Schaeffer that was dedicated at the church in 1997. Hairston organized the ceremony.

"Boy, does she know how to put on an event," Bechtel said. "It was wonderful. I developed an incredible respect for her. Before the project was over, I said, 'Some day I've just got to do Nannie.'" "

Bechtel learned of the quiet ways Hairston worked to make a difference in the community -- opening her home to needy children, pressing to get black women hired at a local garment factory, exposing the plight of blacks who still toiled without pay.

When he heard about a competition offered by the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Bechtel decided it was time to sculpt.

Although his bust of Hairston didn't make it into the competition, he is sure the many hours he devoted were invaluable.

"I got to hear Nannie speak about her life," he said, during trips to Hairston's house this summer to carve and model her visage.

"There's a certain pleasurable intimacy in doing a portrait. She has told me many stories. She would shake her head and recall how it was for her when she first came here."

"This is a portrait of her," he added, "but she has a wider view. For her, it's very meaningful. A black woman to be memorialized this way and put on public display is a real achievement."

NAACP board member Alvin Humes, who has known Hairston for years, volunteered to head up a committee to raise money for the bronze bust and find a permanent home for it -- despite Hairston's protestations.

"Mrs. Hairston was undecided about whether she wanted to do this or not," Humes said. "She said there might be someone else in the community more deserving."

But Humes and others on the committee thought Hairston represents many.

"She really is a representative of community people who work for things," noted Blacksburg resident Lindsay West, who met Hairston soon after moving to Blacksburg in 1962.

Explaining that she got to know Hairston during civil rights demonstrations, West said she didn't remember if Hairston actually marched against injustice.

"If she didn't march in them, she probably organized them," West said. "She's one of the most tolerant people I've ever met about other people and other people's viewpoints."

"Just about anything you can think of as far as goodness is concerned, she's been involved in," Humes agreed.

Humes said the committee's idea to put the sculpture in the government center was met with acceptance, the very thing Hairston worked for in her life.

"I'm not only proud of her," he said, "but I'm proud of our community. I'm proud of the board of supervisors and people in our community for accepting this. There's been a tremendous amount of respect for this sculpture."

Hairston, who plans to attend Saturday's ceremony with her husband, John, said she can't express her feelings about the recognition.

"I'm really pleased with it, but the big thing that I still say is 'Why me?'"