

“Little Progress ‘Happens’”

Faburn E. DeFrantz and the Indianapolis Senate Avenue YMCA

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Little progress ‘happens.’ Usually it must be wrested from influences that—either belligerently or indifferently—deny it.

Faburn DeFrantz

One of the enduring questions that students of the African American experience encounter is “how?” How did those who went before endure the burdens of segregation, discrimination, and antipathy? It is a boundless question that rejects any complete answer, but one finds in the example of people like Faburn E. DeFrantz a part of the answer.

Faburn DeFrantz was executive secretary of the Senate Avenue YMCA in Indianapolis from 1916 to 1952. During that time, the Senate Avenue Y, primarily through DeFrantz’s efforts, became the largest segregated YMCA in the United States. If the size of the branch were its most significant fact, then there might be little reason to herald the Y and its place in Indiana history. Indianapolis housed one of the largest African American populations in the North, so it is not surprising that it would have a sizable YMCA. The Senate Avenue branch was the most significant African American YMCA in the country for other reasons: because it actively pursued political education, because it served as an agent for citywide desegregation efforts, and because it had in Faburn DeFrantz a

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leader who believed that the YMCA could be a vanguard for change in the city and state.¹

The Young Men's Christian Association was established in London, England, in 1844 as an attempt to give healthier opportunities for recreation and rest than those afforded by the pubs and brothels that abounded in the British capital during the early years of the Industrial Revolution. The first Y in the United States opened in Boston in the closing days of 1851. Two years later, the first Y for African Americans opened in Washington, D.C. For ninety-five years, the organization supported segregated facilities for black and white members.² The Senate Y was officially recognized by the Indiana State YMCA in 1902 and became a branch member of the Indianapolis Association in 1910. From its inception, the Senate Y intended to be self-sufficient. It was the first segregated Y to launch and successfully complete a fundraising appeal.³ Perhaps the willingness of Indianapolis's African American community to support the Y explains why, within seven years of its founding, the Senate Y was the largest segregated branch in the United States.

Nationally, the YMCA provided an unusual opportunity for capable African Americans. William A. Hunton and Jesse E. Moorland spent much of the late nineteenth century actively creating segregated YMCAs while simultaneously fighting, politely, with the organization's leadership about the continued presence of segregated branches. Hunton, the first full-time black YMCA secretary in the United States, in 1891 became the international secretary and the highest-ranking African American YMCA official in the United States. Moorland was Hunton's assistant on the international staff and succeeded his mentor after Hunton's retirement. During the 1890s he supervised black association work nationwide and laid the foundation for a semi-autonomous African American YMCA.⁴

African Americans frequently sought to rest their appeal for greater freedoms upon well-established American precepts, particularly an adherence to Christianity. African Americans thought they had an ally in

¹Stanley Warren, *The Senate Avenue YMCA for African American Men and Boys* (Virginia Beach, Va., 2005), 32-33.

²Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852-1946* (Lexington, Ky., 1994), 126-27.

³Warren, *The Senate Avenue YMCA*, 36.

⁴Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness*, 3, 50-51.

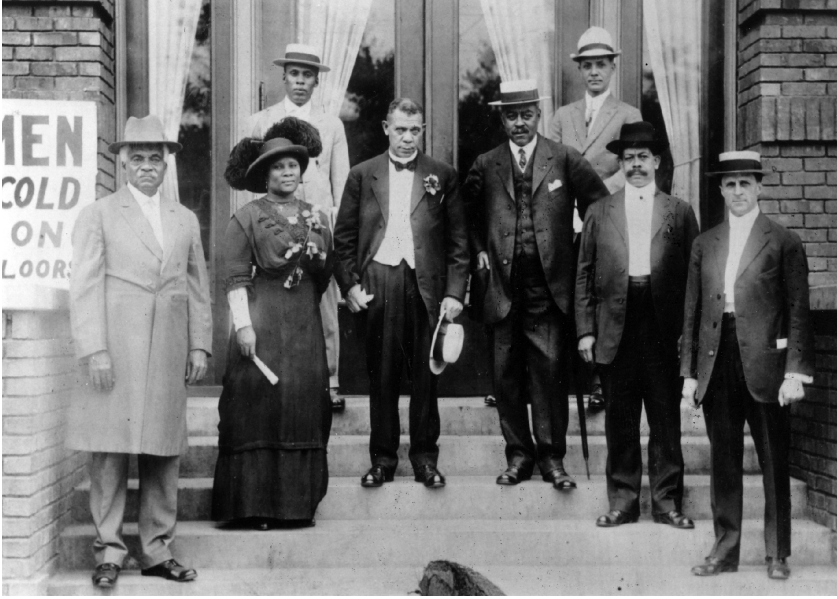
the YMCA, but the Americas section of the international YMCA split over racial policy: Canadian YMCAs refused to segregate their branches, while those in the U.S. conformed their racial policy to local practice. Consequently, most branches in the U.S.—both southern and northern—were segregated. In trying to form Negro branches, Hunton and Moorland sought to allow young men the opportunity and space to be safe from the influences of the street and follow a pious recipe for racial uplift, but in doing so they tacitly accepted the racial strictures of the governing organization. Their work reflected a classic conundrum for African Americans: Do we participate in Jim Crow practices in order to take what benefit they provide, or forego them as a matter of principle? Hunton and Moorland believed that each successful branch would provide an example that Jim Crow separation was no longer necessary or desirable—they sold the promise of the YMCA and not its current reality.

African Americans were long accustomed to delaying their gratification. Booker T. Washington and other African American leaders preached an approach that historian Kevin Gaines termed a “politics of respectability.” Practitioners were encouraged to display their deservedness for full freedoms by exercising piety, Christian faithfulness, thrift, and hard work.⁵ If a substantial portion of the black community adhered to such characteristics, proponents said, then surely full civil rights would follow. Membership in segregated YMCAs offered an example of adherence to a protest movement that can best be described as, “They’ll give us our rights when we can prove that we deserve them.” Faburn DeFrantz was not as patient in waiting for change as were those more firmly in the grip of the politics of respectability.

DeFrantz arrived in Indianapolis in 1913, after a brief residence in Washington, D.C., to serve as the physical director for the Senate Avenue Y. DeFrantz was not new to YMCA work. His brother was the executive of a segregated YMCA in Topeka, Kansas, and it was there that Faburn, who served both as physical director and janitor, got his start in Y work.⁶ By 1916, DeFrantz had so distinguished himself that the Senate Y’s Committee of Management quickly appointed him to succeed Thomas Taylor as executive secretary. When one studies the history of Indianapolis during this period, one finds a dearth of African American

⁵Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996).

⁶Faburn DeFrantz, “To Kathy and David,” typescript, p. 20. Typescript copy in files of the IMH.



Dedication ceremony, Indianapolis Senate Avenue YMCA, 1913. George Knox, one of the founders of the branch, stands at the far left; to his right are Madam C. J. Walker, Freeman B. Ransom (attorney for the Walker company), special guest Booker T. Washington, Alexander Manning (editor of *Colored World* newspaper), Dr. Joseph H. Ward, R. W. Bullock (secretary of the Louisville YMCA), and Thomas Taylor (Senate Avenue secretary).

Courtesy, Indiana Historical Society

clerics at the forefront of community leadership, a fact perhaps occasioned by the strong presence of leaders without parishes. Certainly, that description fits Faburn DeFrantz. The Senate Y was his domain, and from the corner of Michigan and Senate Avenues he involved himself and Y members in the most pressing issues of the day.

Senate Avenue became known nationally for the Sunday afternoon meetings in which dignitaries, politicians, and scholars—local, regional, and national—took to the stage to inform interested and large audiences of the issues of the day. DeFrantz inherited the Monster Meetings, as these Sunday gatherings were called, but he made them decidedly more political and less determinedly focused on religious education. During his tenure, the Monster Meetings focused on such topics as the relaxation of racial restrictions at Indiana and Purdue Universities, the opening of downtown theaters to blacks, the integration of the Indiana High School Athletic Association, the preparation of the Anti-Hate Bill that

became law in 1947, and the school desegregation bill in 1949. DeFrantz invited both white and black speakers to the rostrum and in so doing helped to maintain the lines of communication that characterized African American progress in Indiana's largest city. The Monster Meetings were the focal point for protest and constituent education in Indianapolis, but the impact of those who were educated on those Sunday afternoons was felt throughout the state.⁷

DeFrantz believed that the primary purpose of the Monster Meetings was to educate the community and thereby fulfill Senate Avenue's mission. In the memoir that follows, he quotes Mordecai Johnson, the first black president of Howard University, as to the significance of the Sunday affairs: "The redcap and the lawyer, the laborer and the doctor seek, together to find answers to social and political questions...herein is the very genius of Christianity."⁸ DeFrantz's willingness to confront whites directly over inequality was unusual for an African American in Indianapolis. Nonetheless, he was able to gain the respect of those he confronted. In 1944, DeFrantz won the Indianapolis Church Federation's Interracial Merit Award. Members of the Senate branch staff joked that DeFrantz won the award not because of the mollifying element he brought to race relations but rather because he did not start a riot in Indianapolis.⁹

DeFrantz did not contain his efforts to Indianapolis. In 1947, he led a delegation that included Rufus Kuykendall, Everett Hall, Al Spurlock, and Hobson Ziegler to Bloomington, to meet with Indiana University's legendary president, Herman B Wells, in an effort to break the gentlemen's agreement in the Big Ten that refused participation to African Americans in swimming, wrestling, and basketball. Kuykendall and Hall were IU graduates and well-connected Indianapolis lawyers; Spurlock was a teacher at Indianapolis Crispus Attucks High School and had been a varsity sprinter at the University of Illinois; Ziegler was DeFrantz's assistant at Senate Y.¹⁰ DeFrantz believed that the university could take a leadership role in improving race relations within the state. The year before, he had tried to desegregate Indiana college basketball

⁷Warren, *The Senate Avenue YMCA*, 47; Warren, "The Monster Meetings at the Negro YMCA in Indianapolis," *Indiana Magazine of History* 91 (March 1995), 57-80.

⁸DeFrantz, "To Kathy and David," 52.

⁹*Ibid.*, 33-35.

¹⁰Tom Graham and Rachel Graham Cody, *Getting Open: The Unknown Story of Bill Garrett and the Integration of College Basketball* (New York, 2006), 113-14.

with Anderson's Johnny Wilson, Indiana's Mr. Basketball for 1946. While Wells was sympathetic to DeFrantz's plea, saying that "Any boy who can make the grade is a candidate for our team and must be given the opportunity to play," basketball coach Branch McCracken was not inclined to be the first coach in the conference to break the gentlemen's agreement. McCracken acknowledged that Wilson was a fine player, but stated that he did not believe Wilson could make his team.¹¹

When DeFrantz returned to Bloomington in 1947, this time promoting Shelbyville's Bill Garrett, the 1947 Mr. Basketball, he came with a delegation that indicated to Wells that should he be forestalled again legal action would ensue. DeFrantz preferred to work collegially, but he was not afraid to confront those in power. Wells, taking note of the presence of the largely silent lawyers in the group, well understood DeFrantz's thinly veiled threat. DeFrantz garnered the president's support and, having that, was able to obtain McCracken's agreement to give Garrett a fair chance at playing for Indiana University.¹² Soon thereafter, DeFrantz was able to convince Wells to provide campus housing for African American women.

In the following excerpts from DeFrantz's unpublished memoir, intended as a letter to his grandchildren, Kathy and David, readers will find additional examples of DeFrantz's involvement in varied protests during the first half of the twentieth century.¹³ They will also find a man who was proud of his accomplishments, unapologetic about his brusque manner, and secure in knowing that he had made a positive impact on his community. He had every reason to be proud—he made the Senate Avenue YMCA an institution that both served the soul and fought the earthly battles against discrimination and racism. DeFrantz believed that the YMCA executive should seize the opportunity to relate YMCA purpose to community living. That he did.



¹¹Ibid., 113.

¹²Bil Garrett went on to an All-American basketball career at Indiana University and played professionally, briefly, for the Harlem Globetrotters. Ibid., 101-126, 158-68.

¹³Kathryn DeFrantz was the first child of Faburn DeFrantz Jr. and Flora Turner DeFrantz; R. David DeFrantz was the first child of Robert David DeFrantz and Anita Page DeFrantz.