

Letter from Charlottesville

Ashley Diaz Mejias writes about the legacy of civil rights pioneer Victoria Gray Adams (1926-2006).

By Ashley Diaz Mejias (MA Religious Studies, '06)

In the fall of 2004, I moved to Charlottesville from an inner-city community in Memphis to begin my graduate studies in theology, ethics and culture. I had developed a taste for the somewhat chaotic activity of working in neighborhood development, and my transition to the comparative stillness of the university world was a jarring one. I quickly developed a particularly severe case of graduate student anxiety and spent hours designated for study staring into space, wondering what exactly it was I was doing here in school and when I could return to work on behalf of a community.

A few weeks into that first semester, however, I began transcribing the various talks and lectures that had been given for the Project on Lived Theology, a research initiative which brings together community builders, pastors, activists and scholars to help describe the religious commitments that animate their work. Hunched beneath mammoth-sized headphones in the Robinson Media Center, I encountered the voice of Victoria Gray Adams. Her first official visit to the project came in the summer of 2003 at the Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage, and in the narrative of her participation in the struggle for civil rights, I began to understand the possibility that community change included not only the social participation in justice work but the academic and the spiritual as well.

Born in Palmer's Crossing, Miss., a historically African-American community near Hattiesburg, Mrs. Adams left her career as a door-to-door saleswoman of Beauty Queen cosmetics to become a teacher for voter registration campaigns in south Mississippi and eventually a full-time activist as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. She, along with Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Divine and others, built a network of local support that came to fruition during Freedom Summer of 1964 when she became the first African-American woman to run for the U.S. Senate on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's ticket. Mrs. Adams lost by a 30-to-1 ratio in the primary, but she continued on to the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. In 1968, as the result of their work, Mississippi seated an integrated delegation at the Democratic National Convention.

Initially, her story's effect on me was predictable. Seven minutes and four transcribed pages into her talk, I was mentally packed and on my way back to the trash-lined streets of South Memphis. As I continued to listen to that 2003 presentation, however, I heard Mrs. Adams say, "I don't share with you ... because I want to hear you say, 'Oh, you are so brave and you had such courage.' Rather, I share with you because I want you to be able to appreciate the fact that you don't have to be especially situated to begin to be a servant minister, one who works on behalf of the community, in whatever ways that scene needed at any given moment."

In October of 2005, I finally met Mrs. Adams when she returned to the University on one of her many visits to speak to students studying the religious underpinnings of the civil rights campaign. She would frequently speak to students, describing the particularities of the

movement to end the persecution and segregation of African-Americans as the pieces of the journey towards beloved community, "the journey towards the Kingdom of God." The movement's arms embraced a specific injustice but always stretched toward a universal hope for human flourishing. Though all those in the cast of players who fashioned the 1960s movement's tender stories of courage, Mrs. Adams explained, she understood their role as that of "seed people, planted for a rich harvest."

Though I had chosen to continue with my studies, I was still suspicious of the academic world's service to real social change. At a dinner later that night, I found myself sitting next to Mrs. Adams, hoping to ask further questions about her development work, her pastoral ministry and her growth as a woman in the movement. Instead, the worries and fears of my years in graduate school came tumbling out.

With great gentleness, Mrs. Adams asked me to recall the rich harvest of which she had spoken. As the new generation of seed people, our reaping must continue, and was continuing, as we asked probing questions of our academic, spiritual and civic communities, as we recorded her story and the stories of others who similarly transformed the journey of our nation, and as we worked to refuse the complacency that our privilege could offer. I finally began to understand. Mrs. Adams warned me that the civil rights movement did not reach conclusion with the seating of an integrated delegation in 1968, nor will it reach conclusion, as long as the pockmarks of oppression, estrangement and suffering are borne on the soul of society. The movement continues, and the anatomy of participation comprises, and requires, all communities, all disciplines.

Miguel de Cervantes, Spanish novelist and playwright, once wrote that there is an astonishing power in the transformative legacy, a power that brings tremendous hope to lie parallel to the sorrow of those left in the wake when a compelling life is lost. On Aug. 12, 2006, the life of Victoria Gray Adams came to an end in her home in Petersburg, Va., yet the indelible mark of her legacy witnesses to this power of which Cervantes wrote.