

**“YES, WE ARE EVERYWHERE”:
THIRTY YEARS WITH THE WOMEN
FOR PROGRESSIVE ACTION, LOWER NINTH WARD**

ELLEN BLUE

This essay is about a group of African American women from Hartzell United Methodist Church who formed a grassroots organization in 1974 that would work for the betterment of all residents of the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans until 2005. They had made plans to celebrate the completion of their thirtieth year of existence the weekend that Hurricane Katrina made landfall in August, 2005. Almost all of the historical documentation of their activities was lost in the flood after the levee breaks. One copy of the booklet prepared for the anniversary events survived because it happened to be on the second floor of a flooded home.¹ The group did not do publicity in mass media or have a newsletter; most communication was accomplished through telephone calls and face-to-face conversations which leave no records. Many of the women remain in the Katrina Diaspora, and several have died during the past two years. Thus, a consideration of the members' recollections is timely.

The group came to my attention during an immersion course I teach on “The Church’s Response to Katrina.” Seminary students travel to New Orleans to study how various Christian denominations have re-created—or in some cases not re-created—themselves after the storm. At Hartzell UMC, the only extant United Methodist Church in the Lower Ninth Ward, we talked with June Sanchez, who has been one of the pillars of that congregation for decades. Along with discussing what the congregation accomplished in its neighborhood, she mentioned the Women for Progressive Action, Lower Ninth Ward (WPA) and some things that Hartzell women had accomplished through working with women from other denominations.² Since then, I have conducted several interviews with her and interviewed three other members who live in New Orleans; one who lives in Liberty, Mississippi; and one who lives near Jackson, Mississippi.

WPA member Dolores Parker told me about the CWCD, Citizens Working for Community Development.³ One of the WPA’s first activities was holding voter registration drives; they saw that as a key way to empower the

¹ *Women for Progressive Action Lower Ninth Ward: 30th Anniversary Celebration*, booklet developed for organization’s anniversary, August 26-28, 2005. Forty-eight pages. Photocopy in possession of the author.

² The women refer to their organization as the WPA, and therefore this essay uses that acronym despite any possible confusion with the New Deal agency.

³ Dolores D. Parker, interview by the author, Byram, Mississippi, July 23, 2012.

community. However, a few years later, practices changed so that only large groups like the NAACP and Urban League organized drives. Because the women still wished to be active in the political process but did not consider it appropriate to involve their civic club in partisan activities, they incorporated a second organization with the same officers, the CWCD. (That sounds simple, but the first lawyer the women approached to incorporate the WPA refused, saying it was “just a women’s organization” and therefore had no need for legal status. They eventually went to a female lawyer in a neighboring parish who did the legal work for them.)⁴

Thus, the women belonged to three overlapping organizations: 1) the civic-oriented WPA; 2) the politically partisan CWCD; and 3) a denominationally specific religious women’s group which for most of the leaders was the United Methodist Women (UMW).

The Birth of the WPA

The Women for Progressive Action, Lower Ninth Ward, began one late summer afternoon in 1974. It was the time of year when people are exhausted with the heat and yearning for fall. It was also when the fiercest hurricanes arrive, like Betsy in 1965, and Katrina in 2005.

Five women—June Sanchez, Gloria White, Bernice Carkum, Florence Jasper and Geraldine Ohillia—were sitting out in the yard at the Ohillia house.⁵ Each was already involved in various community activities, but as they discussed the events they and their children attended, they realized that none was ever held in Lower Nine. Opportunities for the people of the Lower Ninth Ward were far more limited than for those who lived in more affluent, white-dominated sections of the city.⁶ The women got the idea that they could work together to improve life for the residents of their own neighborhood. Bernice Carkum recalled that on that first day, “there were so many needs that we didn’t actually decide on what exactly we were going to do. We just felt we needed to do something.” They soon held an inaugural meeting “at June’s house and we got organized, and from there, we started moving.”⁷

The founders recruited participants from several denominations that had congregations nearby. The WPA’s thirtieth anniversary program demonstrates that members quite definitely considered their community involvement to be a form of Christian service. Their construction of a web of Christian women’s leadership enriched life in the Lower Ninth Ward for three decades.

⁴ June Sanchez, Gloria White and Ruby Foster, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 25, 2012.

⁵ *Women for Progressive Action Lower Ninth Ward: 30th Anniversary Celebration* booklet.

⁶ A consideration of difference in the pace of recovery in 2012 between the Lower Ninth Ward and Lakeshore demonstrates the continuity of institutional racism and its economic consequences.

⁷ Bernice Carkum, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 12, 2012.

Hartzell UMC and the Lower Ninth Ward

The Lower Ninth Ward is an area downriver from the Industrial Canal. Having earlier been the site of several plantations, it was settled relatively late. Land was affordable, so it became home for families who resided in small, often shotgun-style houses, and eventually became a primarily African-American neighborhood. It had a higher-than-average percentage of home owners, but also many low-income and unemployed people. When the levees broke, the damage was particularly bad, and it was one of the last areas residents were permitted to re-enter. It was proposed that the area be converted to green space, but activists prevented that decision.

Hartzell UMC, the only United Methodist congregation in the Lower Ninth Ward, is located at 2014 Caffin Avenue. It was founded in 1926 as a congregation of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC). Its handful of members named it after Bishop Joseph Crane Hartzell, a white pastor sent to oversee MEC work in Louisiana. He became editor of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* and played a great role in improving education for African Americans.⁸

Hartzell UMC sponsored a day care center known as one of the city's finer early childhood development centers. For many years, Gloria White was its director. The center enabled mothers to be gainfully employed and gave children an excellent foundation for their schooling.⁹

June Sanchez

The work of the WPA always revolved around the woman who served as its president for thirty years, June Foster Sanchez. She was also president of the CWCD. Born in July, 1931, she had parents determined to provide her and her sister Gloria with opportunities that they had lacked. Her mother, Ruby Foster, a domestic worker, completed only the eighth grade at Blessed Sacrament School, but she deeply valued her education and still has beautiful penmanship. Sanchez's father, James Harold Foster, attended McDonough 35 High School until he had to drop out in the last year, and he later obtained his GED. He was employed as a laborer, but was good with electronics and

⁸ "Hartzell United Methodist Church," entry in the "Historical Register of the Louisiana Conference," accessed October 14, 2012, at http://www.iscuo.org/no_hartzell.htm; "History of Hartzell United Methodist Church" in *Hartzell United Methodist Church: Eighty-Fourth Church Anniversary*, booklet developed for observance on September 25, 2011; "Hartzell, Joseph Crane," *The Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 1918, James E. Homans, ed., accessed at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Cyclop%C3%A6dia_of_American_Biography/Hartzell,_Joseph_Crane on October 7, 2012.

⁹ Even though the neighborhood is still far from recovery, Hartzell UMC is worshipping in their renovated building because of the UMC's decision not to abandon the Lower Ninth Ward. The building housed long-term volunteers, including college students who spent summers gutting and repairing homes. Currently, Hartzell rents a part of its space to Total Community Action which has placed two agencies, the Lower Ninth Neighborhood Council and the Florida Desire Council, there until the nearby community centers reopen. These agencies provide funds for weatherization of houses and utilities for the needy, and they distribute food commodities on a quarterly basis.

took correspondence courses in that field. He was able to repair televisions. “And our record player,” Sanchez said, “not only did he build the cabinet, but he assembled the crystal part, and we had our own record player. And everybody would come over and dance at our house, because we had that . . . So we were proud of my daddy.”¹⁰

Sanchez’s father heard of a high school for black students called Gilbert Academy that was operated by The Methodist Church. Located on St. Charles Avenue where DeLaSalle High School is now, Gilbert Academy would today be thought of as a magnet school. Mr. Foster became convinced that his two daughters should attend there, and they did, though it closed before Gloria graduated. In his landmark book on the role that the NAACP and African American attorneys played in Louisiana’s civil rights struggle, Adam Fairclough described the impact of Gilbert Academy: “[a] fortunate few attended With an enrollment of about four hundred, this Methodist institution was, in the view of educator Horace Mann Bond, ‘one of the best, if not the best, secondary schools for Negro youth in the country.’ By the time it closed in 1949, a list of Gilbert Academy’s alumni read like a who’s who of black New Orleans.”¹¹ Sanchez was in that last graduating class in 1949. Other Gilbert students included Ambassador Andrew Young. The graduates still hold a reunion every other year, and they are plainspoken about the school’s focus on reaching what W.E.B. DuBois would call the “talented tenth.”

June Sanchez went on to Dillard University, where she majored in education. Asked what she thought was the most significant thing she had ever achieved, she replied it was being the first one in her family to graduate from college. “Once one person opens the door, others can go through it,” she said.¹² She and five other Dillard seniors earned a scholarship for a master’s degree at Harvard. In February, 1954, the students were pictured with Dillard president, Dr. Albert Dent, in *The Louisiana Weekly* which reported that the students were “in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard under a program sponsored by the Fund for the Advancement of Education to improve teacher education on the pre-school, elementary and secondary levels. Dr. Dent said that the graduates were selected by Harvard University from a field of liberal arts candidates screened by a Dillard faculty committee.” After graduation, each would return to New Orleans to teach for a year and “attend seminars in first-year teaching problems at Dillard University.”¹³

Going to Harvard was a marvelous opportunity for Sanchez, but it proved to be a mixed blessing. While one might expect her career to have flour-

¹⁰ June Sanchez, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 26, 2011.

¹¹ Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: U Georgia P, 1995), 37.

¹² June Sanchez, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 15, 2012.

¹³ “6 Dillard Honor Grads Studying at Harvard,” *The Louisiana Weekly*, February 20, 1954, reproduced in Rachael Apfel, “BFFs,” *Ed: The Magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education*, summer, 2012, available at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news-impact/2012/05/bffs/?issue=21>.

ished, she was stymied at the classroom level. In some senses, her time at Harvard had put her in liminal space. In his 1933 book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, C. G. Woodson, the second African American to earn a Ph.D. at Harvard, offered reasons that black people should be suspicious of white educational institutions. Educated Negroes could not participate in “systematic effort toward change” since their minds had “been brought under the control of [their] oppressor,” he wrote. “When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his proper place and stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.”¹⁴ It is possible that administrators who held June Sanchez’s career in their hands might have shared his viewpoint about her Ivy League degree. Although by the 1970s it had become very clear to Sanchez that she was not going to advance in the school system, she loved teaching first graders and did not want to leave her school. She did, however, serve as an instructor at Dillard University for many years and supervised many student teachers.¹⁵

It appears that she chose to re-channel the abilities that could have been such a gift to the public school system into volunteer organizations instead. Along with the UMW, the WPA and the CWCD, she was president of the Ruth Carter Auxiliary to People’s Community Center, a Methodist institution in the Central City area, and active in the Top Ladies of Distinction and Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. For the program for a 2009 awards ceremony, she stated that her personal philosophy was “Using my God-Given ability, knowledge and talents to assist, serve, inspire, and encourage members of my home, the church, the school, and the community.”¹⁶

The CWCD’s Political Work

Because the CWCD was much shorter-lived than the WPA and more narrowly focused, it is addressed first in this essay. It will make things clearer to discuss the political and civil rights work of some of the women’s husbands at the beginning of this section. June Foster met her future husband, Andrew Sanchez, in second grade, and “We grew up together.” Both went to Gilbert Academy, but while she attended Dillard, he went to Southern University in Baton Rouge. He was in ROTC and after graduation served in the military, stationed in Japan. Later he taught Industrial Arts in the Orleans Parish school system and received a master’s degree in guidance and counseling from Xavier University. Later still, he was the first black department head

¹⁴ Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Reprint of the 1933 edition by Seven Treasures Publications, 2010. Kindle edition. Locations 141-152, 152-156.

¹⁵ June Sanchez, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 15, 2012.

¹⁶ Women on Assignment, Inc. and Senator Ann Duplessis, District II Community Enhancement Corporation, “Sister June Sanchez” in “Fathers and Mothers United for Change . . . The Community says Thanks!” Program prepared for awards ceremony on May 23, 2009, New Orleans, Louisiana. Copy in possession of the author.

in the City of New Orleans, appointed to head the Property Management department by Mayor Maurice “Moon” Landrieu. Andrew was also an elected member of the State Central Committee of the Democratic Party.¹⁷ After his death in 1979, the Andrew P. Sanchez, Sr. Multi-Service Center, a community center located at the corner of Caffin and Claiborne Avenues, was named for him.

During the Civil Rights era, he worked with SOUL, the Southern Organization for Unified Leadership, which “was based on the black homeowners and middle-income and lower-class blacks of the Lower Ninth Ward.” Formed in 1965, it “soon became the dominant black political organization in New Orleans.”¹⁸ Like Andrew, its leaders Robert Collins and Lolis Eric Elie were graduates of Gilbert Academy.¹⁹ Later, SOUL splintered, and Andrew moved to an offshoot, ROOTS, and later to PRIDE. There were at least two PRIDE organizations; in his, it stood for People Responsible and Interested in Democratic Efforts.²⁰ Bernice Carkum’s husband, Curtis, a Gilbert Academy alumnus, was PRIDE’s president. After he retired as a teacher and guidance counselor, Curtis joined Mayor Marc Morial’s staff as the city’s liaison with business. He hoped to rejuvenate PRIDE post-Katrina, but many board members did not return.²¹

The CWCD and WPA members absolutely did not consider themselves an auxiliary to their husbands’ organizations. Each woman answered that question with a quick, unequivocal “No.” The women do not see themselves as having been involved in the Civil Rights movement, because they worked all day and came home to take care of their children in the evenings. They see the WPA and CWCD as something else entirely, formed precisely because the women didn’t have an organization. “We did things for the women,” one said. They had their own agenda and felt and claimed a separate identity all their own.

Dolores Parker said the CWCD’s goals were to seek good government, to provide a group where women could work together, to help the community, and to see that Lower Nine had political representation. Throughout the ten years of the CWCD’s existence, the group did canvassing and held coffee parties for candidates such as Cynthia Willard-Lewis and Ann Duplessis. More frequently, they educated the community about issues in coming elections.²²

Only two CWCD women, June Sanchez and Nelka Pinkney, were actually members of the League of Women Voters. “You had to pay dues,” Sanchez said. Those two attended meetings of the League, the NAACP, and other organizations that disseminated information, in New Orleans or Baton

¹⁷ June Sanchez, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 26, 2011.

¹⁸ Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York UP, 1993), 108.

¹⁹ Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 489, n. 40

²⁰ June Sanchez, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 26, 2011.

²¹ Bernice Carkum, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 12, 2012.

²² Dolores D. Parker, interview by the author, Byram, Mississippi, July 23, 2012.

Rouge. Then, they brought that information back to Lower Nine and taught the CWCD members what they had learned. Members would divide the neighborhood and go door to door, or make phone calls, making sure that everyone understood the importance of voting on things that would affect the community. The relationships and the organizing skills they built in this way enhanced the work they did through their other groups, as well.²³

WPA Activities

Along with a particularly strong contingent from Hartzell UMC, WPA members came from St. David Catholic, Bethel AME, Amazon Baptist, Branch Bell Baptist, Mercy Seat Baptist, St. Rose Missionary Baptist, and Franklin Avenue Baptist Churches, the Caffin Avenue Church of God, and other congregations. The WPA had up to fifty members.²⁴ The group met monthly, usually at Sanchez's house on Charbonnet Street. "There would be chairs stacked practically on top of each other," Gloria White recalled, "and other women sitting on the floor."²⁵

The women I interviewed were not conscious of being part of the national women's movement. They saw themselves as doing what needed to be done for their own neighborhood. They were concerned about things like small businesses leaving their community, in part because of the changing racial makeup of the neighborhood. As in less affluent neighborhoods in other cities, residents had to travel too far to supermarkets selling nutritious foods.

Each one of the women remembered the group's putting together an annual Thanksgiving dinner for senior citizens. Members donated the food, and Sanchez's mother, Ruby Foster, did much of the cooking. The first couple of years, it was held at Hartzell, but soon more people wanted to come than could be accommodated there. St. David Catholic Church, where WPA members Iris LaBeaud and Effie Sims were members, had the largest facility, and they began holding the dinner there. The women loved that it made people happy to be able to come and have a good meal. Sanchez said, "After a few years, we saw the men begin coming in their suits. The women had always dressed up, but when the men began to put on their suits to come, we knew that they thought we were doing something important."²⁶

Bernice Carkum explained, "We wanted to reach as many segments of the community as possible. Everyone talked about it as a depressed community. We wanted to bring a spark of happiness." They collected school sup-

²³ June Sanchez, Gloria White and Ruby Foster, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 25, 2012.

²⁴ The photographs in the 30th anniversary booklet taken when members were worshipping together on earlier anniversary weekends show anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five women in attendance, but no doubt some did not want to or could not leave their own church on a given Sunday morning because of their responsibilities there.

²⁵ The CWCD met less frequently, about every other month. June Sanchez, Gloria White and Ruby Foster, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 25, 2012.

²⁶ June Sanchez, Gloria White and Ruby Foster, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 25, 2012.

plies. They had an Easter egg hunt for the Lower Ninth Ward and made sure each child got a chocolate rabbit, "because otherwise a lot of them wouldn't have had one." At Valentine's Day, they made favors to go on the trays at nursing homes. "It made some people happy to know that somebody thought about them," Sanchez said.

The work was gratifying for the members. Carkum, who belonged to a Baptist church, said, "There were things that I felt really good about, because in poor communities, you don't have a whole lot of educated people. Sometimes somebody would die in the family, and the people did not have the money or the facilities to do a funeral program, and among the members, we had enough resources that we could do things like that for them."²⁷

Each year WPA sponsored a "Feminine Development Seminar." They sometimes dealt with topics for personal improvement, such as professional appearance, but others focused on acquainting women in the neighborhood with larger social issues. For instance, one year the speaker educated the women about Louisiana's (now repealed) "Head and Master" law that gave husbands the right to sell or mortgage property without the knowledge or consent of their wives, even if the wife were listed as a joint owner, and even if she had paid for the property herself. On another occasion, a nurse talked about what was then the new disease, HIV/AIDS. Other health-related topics included good nutrition and how to perform CPR.

Analysis of the extant forty-eight page program booklet compiled for the WPA's thirtieth anniversary celebration is most instructive. Five of the first six pages are acknowledgements of the organization by 2005s political figures, including the mayor, a justice on the state's Supreme Court, a city councilwoman, a state senator, and the state House of Representatives. On Friday evening, August 26, the women had a social at the Andrew P. Sanchez, Sr., Multi-Service Center and on Saturday gathered for their annual luncheon. (They had planned their joint attendance at worship on Sunday, but this was cancelled because of Katrina.) Two pages contain song lyrics for use in the program for the Saturday luncheon; one is "Let There Be Peace on Earth (and Let It Begin with Me)," and the other is "Lift Every Voice and Sing." The featured speaker was Supreme Court Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson. Johnson is a graduate of Spelman College and one of the first African American women to graduate from law school at Louisiana State University.²⁸ In 2012, she was named to succeed the court's retiring Chief Justice.

An extremely brief history of the organization in the booklet concluded: "Women for Progressive Action feel the mission of the Organization is steadily progressing. We are helping and Serving others in need. The quality of life in the Lower Ninth Ward is improving despite the community problems." The longer "President's Message" which Sanchez composed for the anniversary began as follows: "Realizing the necessity of unity for the survival of the organization, the board served as the 'guiding beacon light in the

²⁷ Bernice Carkum, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 12, 2012.

²⁸ "Women for Progressive Action Lower Ninth Ward: 30th Anniversary Celebration" booklet.

night.’ This far, with the help of God, the organization has been steered as a captain steers a ship. Some have gotten off the ship, but others have gotten on. The ship is sailing on smooth seas.”²⁹

The juxtaposition of her metaphorical “smooth seas” with the stormy reality of that Katrina weekend is ironic. However, the most significant phrase in that paragraph is the first: “Realizing the necessity of unity for the survival of the organization.” It seems remarkable that one person led this group successfully for three decades. According to all the women interviewed, there was never controversy about who should be the leader of the WPA. Sanchez insists that she wasn’t thinking about leadership *per se*. “We were thinking about making things happen,” she said.

June Sanchez’s family’s bonds were tight, and all of them, including her father, participated in the group’s work. Her sister, Gloria White, said that whatever one of them did, the whole family did; however, Sanchez said, “All the ideas were not our ideas.” On the contrary, “Ideas came from our members. When someone wanted to do something, that’s what we did. These were Christian women, and we just kept things together.”³⁰ The women have maintained strong friendships, despite the Katrina Diaspora. Each woman I spoke with initially said that if I had talked with Sanchez, there was nothing they would need to add. Oral historians will know that every interview contributes information, not just by providing new viewpoints, but also by providing data that June Sanchez had not thought to mention. However, the sincerity of the women’s initial belief that she could tell me everything anyone needed to know about their work speaks volumes about their regard for her leadership, especially since none was passive or weak. Each was college-educated, had a long-term career in the school system, had successful grown children, and had displayed leadership in other arenas. For instance, Dolores Parker, an educator who, along with teaching at the elementary level, taught adult literacy in a community school, took the initiative to run for office in the Democratic Party. After her career in the school system, Fannie Thompson became a local pastor and served several UMC congregations.

“Everybody Was Somebody”

The theme for the WPA’s thirtieth anniversary was “Ambassadors of Service.” The booklet cover featured a quote from Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund: “Service is the rent we pay to be living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time.” Those familiar with the groundbreaking work that womanist theologians did to expose the harm that religious language about sacrifice and servant leadership can potentially do to women, especially women of color,

²⁹ *Women for Progressive Action Lower Ninth Ward: 30th Anniversary Celebration* booklet.

³⁰ June Sanchez, Gloria White and Ruby Foster, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 25, 2012.

know that hearing “serving” language arouses a hermeneutic of suspicion.³¹ Thus, it is important to note that every one of the women was completely unabashed about saying that she did what she was doing because she enjoyed it. The caption for a photo taken at the seventeenth anniversary observance indicated that after attending worship together at St. Rose Missionary Baptist Church, the women enjoyed a champagne brunch.³² Fannie Thompson commented that everything the women did was “elegant,” and Dolores Parker spoke of anniversary luncheons at Le Pavillion and the Court of Two Sisters.³³

June Sanchez’s “President Message” asserted that

Members of Women for Progressive Action are proud of their churches, home and families, schools, and community. Although critical problems and deficiencies exist in the neighborhood, members serve actively on most committees and boards in the community. We hear the remark, ‘You are everywhere.’ Yes, we are everywhere. Community improvement, service, and enjoyment are our rewards.³⁴

The emotion that underlay the “Yes, we *are* everywhere” response when Sanchez recounted this information to me in an interview clearly stems from a willingness to accept and a desire to celebrate that the network the women constructed was making itself felt all across the Lower Ninth Ward.³⁵ One of the early publications in the second wave of Christian feminism noted a disconnect between the way pride manifests itself in women and in men; in “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” Valerie Saiving pointed out that while pride might be the root of all other sins for men, it was not having enough pride that left many women in harm’s way insofar as their spiritual conditions were concerned.³⁶ The easy acceptance that the churches, homes, families, schools, and community that they were part of were things the WPA should view with gratification and fulfillment is healthy and heartening. Indeed, the potentially problematic language of “sacrifice” that often marks Christian rhetoric seems to have played no role in the WPA. In fact, it might be accurate to say that their work was more about genuine respect for themselves and others as much as it was about service. As Fannie Thompson recalled, “Everybody was somebody,” and she quite clearly meant both those who were served and those who were doing the serving.³⁷

Thompson was one of those who became involved in WPA through

³¹ See for instance Delores S. Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *Beyond Patriarchy: Feminist Transformation of World Religions*, Paula M. Coe, William R. Eakin and Jay B. McDaniel, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 1-14.

³² “Women for Progressive Action Lower Ninth Ward: 30th Anniversary Celebration” booklet.

³³ Fannie Thompson, interview by the author, Liberty, Mississippi, July 23, 2012; Dolores Parker, interview by the author, Bynam Mississippi, July 23, 2012.

³⁴ “Women for Progressive Action Lower Ninth Ward: 30th Anniversary Celebration” booklet.

³⁵ June Sanchez, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 26, 2011.

³⁶ Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 25-42. The essay was first published in *The Journal of Religion* (April, 1960).

³⁷ Fannie Thompson, interview by the author, Liberty, Mississippi, July 23, 2012.

Hartzell's UMW. She grew up in Bogalusa, Louisiana, went to Grambling University where she majored in education and speech and drama, and then worked in the public school system. When her oldest daughter was a baby, she and her husband, who drove a bus for the RTA, bought a home on Gordon Street situated so that she could stand on her porch "and see June's house." She recalled that the Lower Ninth Ward "was the place to be at that time. You could sit out on your porch with your children. The neighbors were friendly. It was just wonderful. I walked to church." She said that association with the WPA and CWCD gave her "structure and stability" and made her "a better wife, mother, grandmother and neighbor, a better Christian and a better person."³⁸

Context: From NACW's "Lifting as We Climb" to UMW's *Ubuntu* Theology

When it was formed, the WPA fit neatly into a tradition, already over a hundred years old, of voluntary associations organized by African Americans. In those established during Reconstruction, members learned how to run a meeting, to pay dues and keep basic financial records, to vote for and elect officers, to recruit and to be leaders, and so forth. In 1974, the women who founded the WPA were well-educated people who had already acquired those kinds of skills during their secondary or even primary schooling. However, not all of the women drawn into the group had the same access to education. "Some that came in with us" were domestic workers or cooks, people who held "just regular jobs," Dolores Parker said. "So we didn't have it with just people with education. We wanted everybody to be part of it."³⁹

Although Christianity can "produce quiescence," Reconstruction historian Eric Foner maintains that "black Christianity inspired not inaction but political commitment." He saw the church as "only the most striking example of the thriving institutional structure blacks created in the aftermath of emancipation. A host of fraternal, benevolent, and mutual-aid societies also sprang into existence." Because they offered people "a chance to manage their own affairs, these voluntary associations embodied a spirit of collective self-improvement."⁴⁰

One particular lens through which the WPA should be viewed is the history of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) which held its first national conference in 1895. For her 1933 history of the NACW, *Lifting as They Climb*, Elizabeth Lindsay Davis used a variation of the NACW's motto, "Lifting as We Climb," for the title. Sieglinde Lemke, author of the introduction to its 1996 reprint, said when Davis "prided herself for doing 'excellent work' or for her 'impressive words,' she was not merely engaging in self-flattery. Rather, Davis was revealing that participation in this movement was not motivated by altruistic motive alone, it also had its merits in

³⁸ Fannie Thompson, interview by the author, Liberty, Mississippi, July 23, 2012.

³⁹ Dolores D. Parker, interview by the author, Byram, Mississippi, July 23, 2012.

⁴⁰ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 94-95.

asserting the self-esteem of the giver.”⁴¹ Another author put it, “Though the women’s club movement was criticized by the black community as being elitist, these women saw themselves as forming a model for correct behavior, and as taking advantage of their social status and wealth to fight for the rights of their race and their sex. The motto, “Lifting as We Climb,” characterized their goals and achievements, which, as African Americans and as women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were outstanding.”⁴²

Asked how the WPA itself figured into preparing women for opportunities that began to open up for some in the 1970s and beyond, Sanchez responded, “I’m not sure that we prepared anyone with a program that was specifically laid out, but we tried to set examples in the community whereby young ladies could follow in our footsteps.” Her body language while she said this conveyed “lifting as we climb.” She drew herself up straight so that she was sitting taller, reached down beside her with her right hand, and with her palm up, raised her hand and arm back up in tandem with her rising head and torso. When I encountered the phrase in the literature, I thought I remembered her having used it. Only listening to the recording convinced me she had not. When I asked her and other interviewees about the motto, none recalled ever having heard the phrase before. Yet Sanchez’s body language had illustrated it as one of the things in which her group was engaged.⁴³ Before Katrina, some members’ daughters—including Angela Sanchez Reese and Angelique White Williams—had joined, and other daughters and friends had begun to support the activities. Katrina has so far disrupted what would have been a natural hand-off to them of the responsibility for bringing in the generation that would follow.

Women from Hartzell UMC who participated in WPA had also been steeped in the tradition and theology of the United Methodist Women. Dolores Parker was treasurer and president of the Hartzell UMW. The daughter of a Methodist minister and the sister of another, Parker was recruited early for WPA and joined “because we didn’t have a civic organization down in the area at the time.” WPA let her “give back to the community and help.” Asked what it did for her personally, she responded, “I learned that women had just as much going for them as the men did, as far as knowledge of different things, and contributing to the organization [of the community].”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Sieglinde Lemke, “Introduction,” in Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), xxxii. Davis listed Sylvania Francoz Williams as president of the NACW chapter in New Orleans, the Phyllis Wheatley Club. One of their projects was supporting Flint Hospital, an MEC-affiliated hospital and institution for training African American medical professionals, in its earliest years; see “Curing Ailments and Conquering Adversity: Flint-Goodridge Hospital, 1896-1983, posted August 28, 2012 at <http://creolegen.org/2012/08/28/curing-ailments-conquering-adversity-flint-goodridge-hospital-1896-1983/comment-page-1/>.

⁴² Anonymous, “Lifting as We Climb: The Women’s Club Movement,” accessed at the Edwardian Promenade website <http://edwardianpromenade.com/african-american/lifting-as-we-climb/> on July 16, 2012.

⁴³ June Sanchez, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 26, 2011.

⁴⁴ Dolores D. Parker, interview by the author, Byram, Mississippi, July 23, 2012.

Fannie Thompson had served as president of Hartzell's UMW and worked at the district and annual conference levels. Gloria White and Ruby Foster were also deeply involved.

June Sanchez was active in the organization beyond the local level, serving at one point as president of the New Orleans District UMW. She said that in 2005, "UMW never did stop" as a result of Katrina. When they held the very first district-wide meeting after the storm, she was present. "They were surprised to see me," she admitted, "because everything was still in disarray. But we found strength in each other and in UMW."⁴⁵

UMW literature would have contained information the women could share with their neighbors on issues of social concern. Methodists historically put great emphasis on the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, and no Methodists have worked more diligently to make Earth look like the Kingdom than Methodist women. Undeniably, the understanding of what the Kingdom would be like has not been universal, but for most Methodist women (even white women in the MECS's WP&HMS), the image of the Kingdom has included a basic level of egalitarianism. Despite a tendency to dismiss "church ladies" as narrow-minded proponents of the *status quo*, the UMW and its predecessors have long been well-informed advocates for social justice.⁴⁶

In her "President's Message" for the 2005 WPA anniversary, Sanchez acknowledged the existence of class structure and diversity even within an economically disadvantaged community, and noted that the WPA women had worked to overcome it: "Women of various ages, religious denominations, and economic levels have joined the organization and participate in the community activities. Some women who reside in other sections of the city have joined, especially those who are employed in the Lower Ninth Ward community."⁴⁷

Over the past several years, the UMW has been lifting up *Ubuntu* theology which is understood to spring from a traditional African philosophy and closely associated with African leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. UMW arranges annual *Ubuntu* journeys, the first having been to Zimbabwe in 2006, the year after the levee breaks. UMW offers an *Ubuntu* Toolkit about how to organize and promote an *Ubuntu* Day

⁴⁵ June Sanchez, interview by the author, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 18, 2009. The outgoing state president looked back in her 2008 report to the first conference-wide meeting after Katrina: "We remember Fannie Reddix as New Orleans District President who was justly proud of her United Methodist Women who attended. Her face shown 'with a glory on' when she announced in her report that New Orleans had met their pledge!" Harriette Elrod, "Louisiana Conference United Methodist Women President's Report 2008," in *Resurrection Women: Living Simply to Resurrect the Earth: Louisiana Conference United Methodist Women 2009 Annual Report and Directory* (privately published, 2009), 35. Copy in the collection of the author.

⁴⁶ See for instance Ellen Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1895-1965* (Knoxville: U Tennessee P, 2011); Alice Knotts, *Fellowship of Love: Methodist Women Changing American Racial Attitudes, 1920-1968* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996).

⁴⁷ "Women for Progressive Action Lower Ninth Ward: 30th Anniversary Celebration" booklet.

of Service.⁴⁸

Desmond Tutu wrote, “[*Ubuntu*] speaks about the intrinsic worth of persons as not dependent on extraneous things such as status, race, creed, gender, or achievement [I]t was seen as what ultimately distinguished people from animals—the quality of being human and so also humane. Those who had *Ubuntu* were compassionate and gentle, they used their strength on behalf of the weak, and they did not take advantage of others—in short, they *cared*, treating others as what they were: human beings.”⁴⁹ He has also explained that *Ubuntu* “captures the concept: ‘I am human because you are human.’ It recognizes that each person is part of a community. . . . Above all, *Ubuntu* describes a coming together of God’s people to celebrate God’s presence and prompting to act on behalf of our neighbors. *Ubuntu* exemplifies our connections to one another and is a foundation for community action and service.”⁵⁰

It is typical of Sanchez that when I asked if she were familiar with the UMW’s recent emphasis on *Ubuntu*, she said that she was not, but immediately wanted to know how to find out more so she could talk with the other women at Hartzell about it.⁵¹ UMW literature cites Tutu saying people who have the worldview of *Ubuntu* “are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole.”⁵² The Hartzell women’s work through the WPA has been a classic example.

In *Righteous Discontent*, her monograph on women in the black Baptist Church, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that “women were crucial to broadening the public arm of the church and making it the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African American community.” She insists black churchwomen’s voices should not go unheard “within the public discourse of racial and gender self-determination.”⁵³ Writing in 1996, social scientist Sieglinde Lemke said Davis’s 1933 history of the NACW “is an important book; it brings to life a world predicated on the assumption that to

⁴⁸ United Methodist Women, Inc., “Ubuntu Day of Service Toolkit,” accessed on December 11, 2012 at http://www.umcom.org/atf/cf/%7B60C02017-4F6A-4F3B-883A-4AFAECE1182F%7D/Ubuntu_Toolkit-PRESS.pdf.

⁴⁹ Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations*, John Allen, ed. (New York: Harper One, 2011), 22-23. See also Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, rev. and updated (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ Desmond Tutu, *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), cited in United Methodist Women, Inc., “Ubuntu Day of Service Toolkit,” 4.

⁵¹ June Sanchez, telephone conversation with the author, December 17, 2012. She is not accustomed to using the internet, but planned to have her niece obtain the *Ubuntu* toolkit from the web.

⁵² Desmond Tutu, *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), cited in United Methodist Women, Inc., “Ubuntu Day of Service Toolkit,” accessed on December 11, 2012 at http://www.umcom.org/atf/cf/%7B60C02017-4F6A-4F3B-883A-4AFAECE1182F%7D/Ubuntu_Toolkit-PRESS.pdf, 5.

⁵³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 1-2.

act locally is the most effective way to bring out broader changes. It would not be surprising if this book became a blueprint for a future generation.”⁵⁴

The Methodist theology of “connection” can easily be found in the year-to-year work of the WPA, but I contend it is also demonstrated in the sometimes deliberate and sometimes intuitive bridging through time of the NACW philosophy of “lifting as we climb,” with the work of late nineteenth and early twentieth century black churchwomen to help themselves and their communities, and with the *Ubuntu* theology which has now become prominent in UMW. The previously undocumented work of the Women for Progressive Action, Lower Ninth Ward women can be said to have embodied them all, even though the women might have been unfamiliar with the particular terminology. It was Sanchez who told my Katrina class that when women are working together, “nothing can hold us back.”

⁵⁴ Sieglinde Lemke, “Introduction,” in Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb*, xxxii.