

Constance Baker Motley

FINALLY, IN DECEMBER 1940, while I was waiting to return to the NYA project, my big break came when I met the man who would change the course of my life. A long established philanthropist in New Haven, Clarence W. Blakeslee, heard me speak at a meeting at the Dixwell Community House...

...Blakeslee was devoted to the community. He was totally committed to Yale...He was equally committed to the city of New Haven and its development. He built the YMCA and YWCA there...He built the YMCA camp in Chester, Connecticut with Edward Hazen...The interracial camp, bigger and better than ever, is still at its site on Cedar Lake...

Blakeslee had arranged a meeting with local people in November or early December 1940 at the Dixwell Community House...He had hoped that black people, especially young ones, would gather there and participate in its activities and in managing and raising money...Although blacks were not excluded from public parks or playgrounds, the city's traditional poor black area, Dixwell Avenue, lacked a youth center. The objective of the meeting was to determine why people were not using the Q House, as the center was called, in the way he had anticipated.

I went to the meeting because I was a community activist and president of the New Haven Negro Youth Council, which I and some others had organized. We had all graduated from high school, but none of us had a satisfactory job or was able to go to college...

The Q House meeting was chaired by George Crawford, the leading local black lawyer. I have no recollection of what was said except the substance of what I said. To Crawford's annoyance, I said that all the people on the board were from Yale, and,

therefore, the black community had no real input into what was going on; they did not consider it their place, and so we did not have a mass response to the center. The meeting ended as usual with no specific outcome. Blakeslee wanted to hear the community views. I was the only speaker to cause a stir. In retrospect, I guess I also represented New Haven's emerging black middle class.

The day after the meeting, I had a telephone call from the newly appointed director of the community center. He said Mr. Blakeslee wanted to see me. I went a day or so later. He and I talked alone in his unpretentious office. He said, as best as I can recall, "I was very impressed with what you had to say the other night. I looked up your high school record, and I see you graduated with honors. I want to know why you are not in college." Startled, I said, "I don't have the money to go to college. My parents do not have the money to send me to college." He asked, "What would you like to do?" I said, "I'd like to be a lawyer." With raised, truly bushy eyebrows, he said, "Well, I don't know much about women in the law, but if that's what you want to do, I'll be happy to pay your way for as long as you want to go. I am sending my grandson to Harvard Law School. I guess if I can send him to Harvard, I can send you to Columbia." Then he said, "Never be afraid to speak up; as Abraham Lincoln said, an independent voice is God's gift to the nation." (43-45)

Baker Motley, Constance. *Equal Justice Under Law*. New York: Ferrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998.

Activities

Problem Solving, Reasoning and Creative Thinking

- This excerpt from Constance Baker Motley's autobiography, *Equal Justice Under Law*, ends with a quote – "Never be afraid to speak up; as Abraham Lincoln said, 'an independent voice is God's gift to the nation.'" Why did Mr. Blakeslee say this to the author? Think of a time that you were afraid to speak up and a time when you did speak up. Compare them.

Working Collaboratively/ Learning Resources/ Creative Thinking/ Speaking, Listening and Viewing

- In groups, construct a freestanding monument that features Constance Baker Motley's likeness. Incorporate symbols for her life activities. Describe the monument on a large card for viewers. Present this to the class as a group.

Speaking, Listening and Viewing/ Writing/ Learning Resources and Information Technology

- Pair students together – Prepare an interview between a client and a lawyer regarding a civil rights violation that you have researched together. Act it out in front of the class.

Working Independently

- Does your neighborhood or town have a community center? Visit it and find out what kind of activities it sponsors. Bring in a list to share with other students.