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Some Champions of Black History Have Overcome Barriers Beyond Race

By Edna Kane-Williams, AARP Vice President, Multicultural Markets and Engagement

Darryl Murphy was just a college freshman in 1985 when he met Dr. Odell Hobbs, his choral instructor at Virginia Union University (VUU). As per his upbringing, Murphy reached out to shake the hand of his new professor and was taken-aback at what he felt.

Seeing the surprised reaction of the young man, Hobbs just chuckled. Having been born with only nubs as fingers, except a thumb on his left hand and a forefinger and thumb on the right, the gifted pianist had grown used to surprised looks and even suffered painful teasing in his youth.

Despite what some would perceive as a handicap, the now late Dr. Hobbs – a Clarkton, N.C. native who passed away in 2008 - excelled against all odds. Born with only three full fingers, he started playing the piano in his home church at the age of 3 and went on to earn a music degree from Howard University in 1960 and then a doctorate from the University of Western Colorado.

Because of his hands, Howard music professors initially questioned his ability to succeed in the rigorous music program.

“When they asked if I had any handicaps, I said no because I never thought of myself as being handicapped because I could do anything I wanted to except wear a glove,” Hobbs said in an exclusive interview videotaped by Richmond, Va. Black history buff John Bynum.

As a test, Hobbs said Howard gave him a probationary period in which to accomplish certain assignments. “I accomplished most of the objectives in a month that had been set for a year,” he said in the video in which he demonstrated his ability to play even classical music with his three fingers and the sides of his hands.

Dr. Hobbs went on to teach music at mostly historically Black colleges and universities, starting at VUU in 1966, where he helped to found the music department and establish a music major. Later in his career, a student choir under his direction at Langston University was selected to represent Oklahoma at the World’s Fair in New York City.

Given the historic struggles of Black people from slavery to Jim Crow to the civil rights movement and even current racial struggles, the progress of African-Americans in general is indeed to be celebrated. But, Hobbs is among champions who used his own barrier-breaking experiences to push others to accomplish their goals – against all odds.

As an accomplished pianist and chorale director, Hobbs impacted the lives of his students far beyond music, recalls Murphy, the former student who was surprised by his hands. Now a history researcher, curator and president of the Beaufort, N.C. Branch of the NAACP, Murphy continued to be mentored by Hobbs well into his professional adult life. In May 2008, he served as a pall bearer at Hobb’s funeral.

“Dr. Hobbs was a master teacher. Who I am today as a professional Black man is because of Dr. Hobbs,” he said in a Black History Month 2014 interview. He recalled how Hobbs taught the choir to sing Negro spirituals with passion and understanding by teaching the singers the historic struggles and events behind the songs. In doing so, “he actually became my history professor.”

Odell Hobbs is not a household name. But there are many other well-known and little-known champions who also overcame hurdles – beyond race - in order to forge American progress. Here are just a few examples:

- Iconic vocalist and pianist Stevie Wonder, who became blind shortly after birth, is not only considered one of the greatest musicians of the 21st century, but was named a United Nation’s Messenger of Peace in 2009. He has used his fame to help win a national holiday for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to fight against apartheid in South Africa, and against world hunger.
- Ever Lee Hairston, known to describe herself as “Black, blind and successful” travels throughout the U. S. and abroad lobbying for the blind. Having picked cotton, attended segregated schools and worked in the civil rights movement alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., she became blind in her late 20s, but gained her

confidence through education. Among other leadership activities, she has served as coordinator for the New Jersey Commission for the Blind LEAD (Leadership, Education, Advocacy, Determination) Program, which mentors blind and visually impaired teens.

- Harriet Tubman, among the most famous heroines in history, suffered from fainting spells and dizziness attributed to a head wound from a master when she was just a teenager; yet she led hundreds of slaves to freedom.

Hobbs, who pushed students to soar above hurdles beyond race, is among this list. Recalls Murphy, “Dr. Hobbs did not accept excuses. And if you did not give him A or B work, you didn’t pass. It was either an A, B or F... Because he had that handicap, he would not accept any excuses.”
