

## BLACK HISTORY MONTH

# FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN TO LEAD NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC WOMEN AIMED TO SHOW OTHERS THEY COULD LEAD

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K. LaVerne Redden knows what it's like to be inspired by others who look like you.

She attended President Obama's inauguration, and her late father, Casey Jones, was the first African-American from Toledo to serve in the Ohio General Assembly.

In her office at St. Martin de Porres Parish on Bancroft Street where she is the director of social concerns, there's even a drawing on the wall of black female pioneers: Mae Jemison, the first to travel in space; Shirley Chisholm, the first to serve in Congress and seek a major party's nomination for president; and others.

"These are my gals," Ms. Redden says. "These are the ones I look up to."

Maybe it was only a matter of time before she became that kind of role model herself.

Long active in her parish community, she took her energy and determination in 1999 and used it to become the first black president of the National Council of Catholic Women, an organization involving more than 4,000 women's parish groups across the country.

One of her personal goals in running for the office was elegant in its simplicity: Show other African-Americans that it could be done.

"I wanted them to see that it's possible," Ms. Redden says. "It's never easy to be a pioneer. It's never easy to be the first at anything."

In those days, she explains, a couple thousand women might take part in conventions and maybe 15 of them would be racial minorities.

When Ms. Redden visited other cities, she'd find no one who looked like her at the meetings.

"Oftentimes, I'd go to the town and I'd say, 'Do African-American women live here? ... Where are they?'"

Ms. Redden made it her job to encourage other blacks - and Hispanics and Asians and others - to get involved and make their voices heard, something she believes enriches everyone.

"When it all comes together, there's this beautiful tapestry of knowledge and faith and culture," she says.

For those who supported her in her bid for president, it wasn't her race that mattered; it was her faith and dedication to service, charity, hope, and even laughter.

"If you know K. LaVerne, you don't care if she's black or white or red or orange. She was the right person," says Barbara Garavalia, who succeeded Ms. Redden as president.



K. LaVerne Redden, the first African-American to lead the National Council of Catholic Women, works in the food pantry at St. Martin de Porres Parish in Toledo. (THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

"She's very much an inspirational lady."

Ms. Redden, a mother of six, has a special brand of can-do philosophy that has carried her throughout her 70-plus years.

A former nurse, Ms. Redden now oversees the food pantry at St. Martin de Porres that hands out bulging grocery bags of food to scores of people every week. She's also president of the London Square Area Neighborhood Club and has been active in area Kwanzaa celebrations for years.

WilliAnn Moore, president of the Toledo branch of the NAACP, mentions her name in the same breath as local icons like Ella P. Stewart, the nation's first black female pharmacist.

"All of these women have been role models for me," she says.

"These women have laid the groundwork for other young African-American women to aspire to reach higher heights."

And while so many African-Americans have rallied around a U.S. president who now looks like them, it's just as important for young black girls to seek role models here at home, she says.

"Here is a living legend in our own community," she says. "They don't have to look elsewhere."

Diane Gordon, Toledo Kwanzaa House coordinator for the Toledo Kwanzaa celebration, says in addition to her work in the religious world, Ms. Redden's contributions locally to help the poor, hungry, and homeless have been invaluable.

"If we didn't have her in our community, Toledo would [have] sorely missed out on a lot of things," she says. "I think that she shows a lot of positiveness when it comes to helping others."

And Joyce Lane, who knows Ms. Redden through the Women Alive! Coalition, says her dynamism, passion, and enthusiasm make her exactly the type of person who could one day be remembered in the group's biographical book series, *In Search of Our Past: Women of Northwest Ohio*.

But right now, Ms. Redden is just interested in getting ready for next week's food handouts or convincing just one more person to make the most of what he or she has.

After all, she can only do so much by herself.

"The world is truly your oyster," Ms. Redden says, "but you've got to open it."

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