



CIVICS LESSON

Lena Horne/Marian Anderson

Civil Rights Activism

In May 1963 meeting in New York City, Lena Horne was one of the participants invited by novelist James Baldwin to discuss the state of race relations with U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Some of the others at the meeting were singer Harry Belafonte, psychologist Kenneth Clark, playwright Lorraine Hansberry and young Freedom Rider Jerome Smith. Smith broke down in tears when he recounted how he had been beaten and jailed in Mississippi.

Though tensions flared during the meeting, there was a turning point in Robert Kennedy's attitude about the struggles of Black Americans. Less than a month after this meeting, President John Kennedy — based on his brother Robert's advice — gave a pivotal Civil Rights speech in which he proposed legislation that became the landmark Civil Rights Act the following year.

On November 20, 1963, Horne again with James Baldwin and along with other leaders such as Democratic National Committee Chairman John Bailey, met with President Kennedy at the White House — just two days before his assassination. Civil Rights was again thoroughly discussed.

Horne's contemporary singer Marian was denied an important stage. In early 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) denied Anderson the right to sing at Constitution Hall. Anderson and others protested, and a furor ensued, causing First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, among thousands of others members, to resign from the DAR. The First Lady prevailed upon President Roosevelt, who worked with Walter White, then-executive secretary of the NAACP, to arrange Anderson's unprecedented concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

On April 9 1939, Easter Sunday, Anderson gave a free open-air concert at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. More than 75,000 people turned out to hear Anderson, and millions of Americans listened on radio. The concert was such a sensation due in large part to the controversy that precipitated it.

Anderson courageously continued to break racial barriers. On January 7, 1955, she became the first African American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City; it was her only operatic performance. She also sang at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, preceding Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech.

Both Lena Horne and Marian Anderson balanced their successful entertainment careers with civil rights activism. Through their professional stature they were able to exercise great societal influence.

Whatever your field of endeavor, what are some ways, like Horne and Anderson, you can balance personal attainment with making a difference for others?