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In Struggle Spotlight
Helen Hampton, Educator
With a Message and an Assignment for President Obama
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Helen Hampton shivered under two blankets. Her knit hat, gloves and whatever layers she wore did little to deter the wind and cold from embracing her as she waited in her wheelchair. She is petite, thin, and while her body may be frail, there was nothing frail about her determination to see Barack Obama take the oath of office as the 44th President of the United States.

First having made the trip from southern Mississippi to Atlanta, Helen and her son had driven to Washington on a trip that took a total of well over fifteen hours. She said she came to the inauguration because she "thought it would be an inspiration."

Mr. President, if you met Helen Hampton, it is she who would inspire you.

It was 1924, in Picayune, MS, in the southernmost part of the state, near the Pearl River, and not far from the Louisiana border. Helen was born into the Jim Crow South. Segregation determined where one lived, where a child found education. Segregation and racism may have defined nearly every moment of Helen's life, but they didn't confine her.

She became an educator, teaching children "from the third grade up through seniors in college." At [Rust College](#), an historically black college in Holly Springs, Mississippi, she taught chemistry and mathematics, finally retiring at the age of seventy-four.

Because I accompanied someone with a walker, I was standing in an accessible area, next to her and her son, enduring the bitter cold and the wind off the Capitol Reflecting Pool. Her eyes caught my attention; they have a brightness about them that drew me to her. She didn't say much, nearly hidden beneath blankets and hat. A few times I

pulled her blanket closer around her, and it was obvious that the day was an ordeal for her. Helen wasn't leaving, however, and from where she sat, she had a good, if distant, view over the pool to the Capitol.

Just before the Inauguration ceremony began, the crowd behind us broke through the retaining fence and swarmed the accessible area. Helen, in her wheelchair, lost her good view in exchange for the backs of ten heads now standing in front of her. I pleaded with those blocking her view to let her see. A few people moved, only to be replaced by others obstinately refusing to allow those in wheelchairs more than an occasional glimpse of the Capitol steps. Even the police ignored my requests to move the standing crowd out of the line of sight of those who couldn't stand. Helen told me she didn't really care about most of the program, though; she just wanted to "see that man take the oath of office."

At the introduction of Barack Obama, I loaned her my binoculars and she twisted in a way so as to peer through the crowd and spot him as he strode out the Capitol door and onto the balcony. Then, when he rose to take the oath of office, Helen's son raised his mother up and supported her so that she could witness what she had traveled so far to see. When she returned to her wheelchair, she possessed a smile only outdone by the look of joy and satisfaction in her shining eyes.

Once the Reverend Lowery's benediction was over, we remained in place while the crowd began to disperse, and I asked her what she hoped for in the Obama presidency.

Mr. President, with all respect, listen up. This woman knows what she's talking about.

Firstly, Helen wants you to "seek good advice and set a good example for other young men and women and the US as a whole."

Secondly, "with all the different states and this new experience" she wants you to help us "all work together as one for our economy to improve, so that people don't lose their homes, so that children have money for college, for better employment, so that young children don't go hungry and for better health care for everyone."

President Obama, this is Helen Hampton's message and assignment for you. She's not asking you to do it all by yourself, but she *is* expecting you to *lead* our country to a better place. If you could meet Helen, you'd know that the words of this smart, gentle woman come from the wisdom of her years and the experience of the struggles and triumphs of her life.

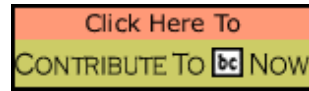
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