Praise for Dorothy Butler Gilliam

"Dorothy Gilliam lived a fascinating life and shares it with you in *Trailblazer.* She started out afraid to tell her editors that D.C. cabs wouldn't stop for her—a problem for a reporter who needed to get to stories on time. She wound up a member of a group of minority columnists who regularly interviewed presidents.

"Her book is a tribute to her generous spirit. No one made greater efforts to share her success with others, to teach school-age journalists, to open the ranks of newspaper management to minorities.

"So many people in journalism are grateful that they met Dorothy. Here's your chance."

—Donald Graham, former publisher of *The Washington Post*

"Dorothy Gilliam is that most rare of revolutionaries, one who not only climbs the barricades, but lets down a ladder to help others up, too. In her more than six decades at the centers of journalism in New York and Washington, she has often been the first African American woman and the best of everything. Her memoir shows us that a few can be both, but no one should have to. We will have no democracy until each of us can be our unique individual selves."

—Gloria Steinem, feminist activist and writer

"Dorothy Gilliam is a great reporter, a pioneer for all women in the news business, and African American women particularly. Her story is about a time in American journalism where courage and brilliance were called for in the white-male bastions that were American newsrooms. It's a story that has been waiting a long time to be told."

—Carl Bernstein, Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter of Watergate fame

"Dorothy Butler Gilliam's inspirational life story is the journey of a daughter of the South who became a pioneering black woman journalist, an influential voice in the pages of *The Washington Post*, a national leader of the movement to foster diversity in the news media, and a dedicated mentor of countless aspiring young journalists. It is also the story of her role in a remarkable era of growth and influence of a leading American newspaper now evolving in the digital age. And it is a welcome gift for colleagues and readers who have benefitted from her work and presence in our lives."

—Leonard Downie Jr., former executive editor of *The Washington Post*, Weil Family Professor, Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications

"Dorothy Gilliam has contributed a rare and important history of the journey of a black reporter, who is also a woman, focusing on *The Washington Post*, but having implications for the entire industry, writ large. Such a book would have always been a great contribution to the canon, but it is even more relevant today as the industry, as well as the society grapples with diversity and the way forward. Dorothy Gilliam provides answers that give us a road map to successfully navigate that way forward."

—Charlayne Hunter-Gault, award-winning journalist, and former foreign correspondent for National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service

"Dorothy Gilliam is a national treasure. Her groundbreaking career in journalism is a monument to triumph, inspiration, grace. She is admired by journalists of color everywhere—not only because of her pioneering body of work but because she cared about us so much."

—Kevin Merida, editor in chief of ESPN's *The Undefeated* and former managing editor of *The Washington Post*

"For those in the forefront, those "Firsts" of black America, life was seldom a crystal stair to a glorious summit. Dorothy Butler Gilliam's memoir of her life and times chronicles such an ever-upward climb, step by step.

"Hers is the story of a woman ahead of her time, yet deeply involved in the critical issues of that time, and deeply concerned about younger ones in time yet to come.

"She succeeded at one of the premier American newspapers, charting a path of determination, commitment, and inspiration for others to discover and appreciate, and to follow as well."

—Milton Coleman, retired senior editor of *The Washington Post*

"Powerful voice, inextinguishable brilliance, quiet strength, elegant beauty, visionary leader, honored journalist: Dorothy Gilliam. First African American female journalist at *The Washington Post*, Dorothy Gilliam is a trailblazer who still is having an impact on journalists and journalism.

"It's my honor to know Dorothy, serve on the board of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, and be one of her many fans who credit Dorothy with being an early career role model."

—Paula Madison, first executive vice president of diversity at NBC Universal, author

"Dorothy Gilliam didn't just shatter racial and gender barriers at *The Washington Post*, she shattered the journalistic view that white 'objectivity' was the only way of seeing the world. Gilliam pioneered a way of writing about African Americans that was accurate, balanced, and compassionate—principles that had only applied to the coverage of whites before she arrived. The courage and intellectual rigor that it took for her to become the first African American woman journalist at *The Post* makes her a revered elder among black journalists today. Transforming the practice of journalism and paving the way for others makes her a legend for all time."

—Courtland Milloy, fellow columnist at *The Washington Post*

"As a documentary filmmaker whose work focuses primarily on African American history, politics, and culture, I find Dorothy Gilliam's trailblazing career and body of work to be invaluable. I'm thrilled by the thought of having her memoirs as a reference, offering insight and wisdom to my understanding of those who paved the way for so many in the field of journalism."

—Phil Bertelsen, producer/director, *Hope & Fury: MLK, The Movement and The Media*

"Dorothy Gilliam offers a needed perspective as the news industry contemplates where it stands fifty years after the Kerner Commission declared that 'the journalistic profession has been shockingly backward in seeking out, hiring, training, and promoting Negroes.' Her experience grappling with this most intractable issue is without peer."

—Richard Prince, columnist, "Richard Prince's Journal-isms," reporting on diversity issues in the news media

"I would like to take this opportunity to support publication of Dorothy Gilliam's memoir, *Trailblazer: A Pioneering Journalist's Fight to Make the Media Look More Like America*.

I began researching Ms. Gilliam's background several years ago when researching a book about the reporters who were on the Ole Miss campus during the 1962 integration riot. Ms. Gilliam is one of twelve reporters featured in the book because of her experiences as a woman in journalism and as an African American reporter during the civil rights era. Her background speaks of a woman who faced challenges and did not let them stop her and as a woman who used her profile to lecture and encourage a generation of journalists to succeed no matter the barriers set in place. She has many stories to tell, the writing skills to do the job, and the eye for detail that should result in a stunning memoir."

—Dr. Kathleen Wickham, professor/journalism, School of Journalism and New Media, University of Mississippi

TRAILBLAZER

A Pioneering Journalist's Fight to Make the Media Look More Like America

DOROTHY
BUTLER GILLIAM

Nashville New York

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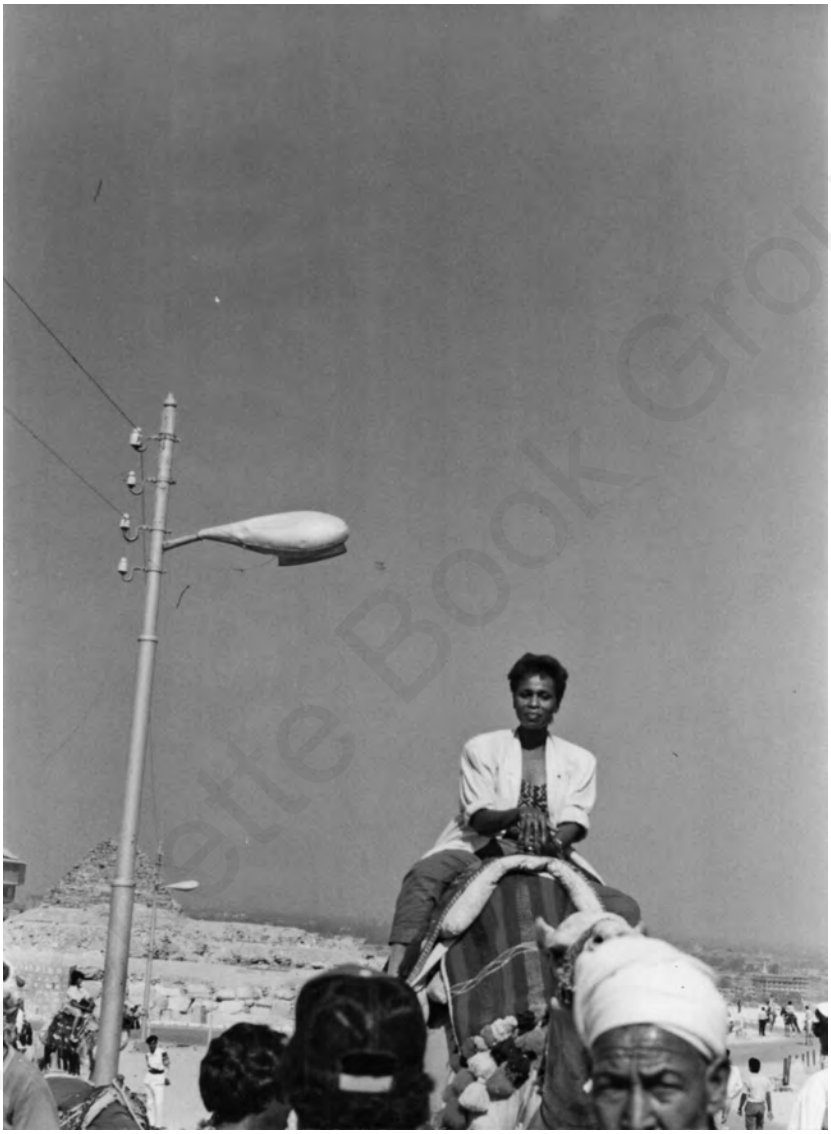
In memory of Robert C. Maynard and Dori J. Maynard, for their journalism diversity leadership and dedication to the goal of helping the news media accurately portray all segments of society. May this work inspire a diverse journalism workforce and help the next generation of journalists of all races and those who aspire to careers in journalism to understand the value of diversity.

Contents

Nelson Mandela with his wife, Winnie Mandela, on his first visit to Washington, D.C., in 1994. Pictured between them, I was honored to cover the visit. I wrote several columns about their trip. (Courtesy of the Dorothy Butler Gilliam personal collection)

My escort John Gamble, President Bill Clinton, and me at the White House State Dinner on October 4, 1994, while I was president of the National Association of Black Journalists. (Official White House Photo)

Pictured far right, I attended an Aspen Institute retreat for journalists in Aspen, Colorado, around 1993. (Ferenc Berko Photo)

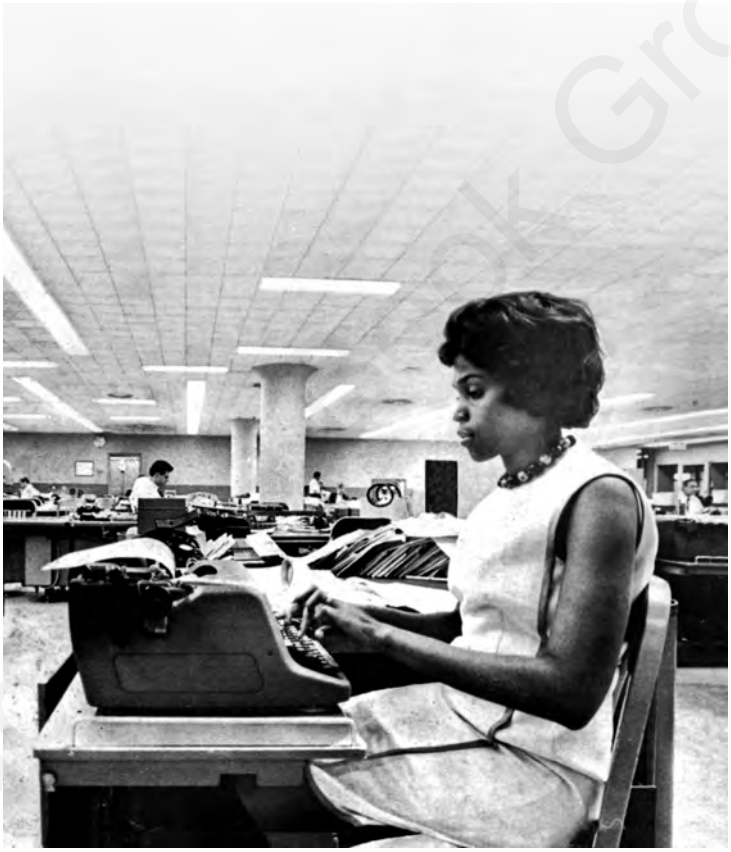


Atop a camel in Egypt while en route to the International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1995. (Courtesy of the Dorothy Butler Gilliam personal collection)

Speaking in Washington, D.C., in 1998 at a community event, about my experience as a Knight teaching fellow. (Courtesy of the Dorothy Butler Gilliam personal collection)

Me, front center, with women members of my Columbia Journalism School Class of 1961 at the fiftieth-year reunion. Our class included only fifteen women, and I was the sole black woman. Seated to my right is Joan Konner, dean emerita of the J-school and who was for many years a producer for Bill Moyers. (Courtesy of the Dorothy Butler Gilliam personal collection)

Coming to *The Washington Post*, 1961



At my desk in the fall of 1961 or early in 1962, soon after I arrived at *The Washington Post*. *(©1962, Harry Naltchayan*, Washington Post*)*

When I arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1961, the city, the entire country, and the African continent were all on the threshold of change. The dashing, young John F. Kennedy had just begun his presidency promising "a new frontier." The Civil Rights Movement was kicking into high gear with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. now urging young people like me to pursue professions we'd been excluded from and to excel. It was thrilling to be in the nation's capital to begin my career as a daily newspaper journalist in the white press.

I brought a pretty placid nature to that career. When I later looked back, I surprised myself. I was so conservative politically! For example, only six years earlier, when I wrote about school integration in the student newspaper while attending Lincoln University from 1955 to 1957 (the Negro college in Missouri that provided higher education for colored students, allowing the state to keep all its other colleges and universities white), I indicated reasons we should go *slowly* with integration. But reporting for *The Tri-State Defender* in Memphis as the Civil Rights Movement dawned had begun to change me. The bus boycott victories had begun to liberate my thinking. And added confidence came from my faith, strengthened my spirit, and pushed me to do things that other people in my family didn't do.

Just twenty-three years old, I was won over by the magnificence of official Washington's buildings and even the romanticism of the streetcars that daily clanged past the U.S. Capitol and on which I could choose a seat anywhere I wished, unlike in the Deep South, where I was born and the segregation was debilitating. The train my family had taken when we moved from Memphis to Louisville, in 1941, had had segregated seating. I don't recall much else

about that train ride, but even though I was only five years old, it was apparent to me that train cars for colored people weren't as nice as those for whites. My mother had prepared our food at home to eat on the train, since African Americans had no dining car and could not use the one for whites. Despite the unsegregated streetcars in Washington, I soon realized, with deep disappointment, that D.C. was a deeply divided, segregated, Southern town, not unlike Louisville and Memphis.

In late September 1961, I went to work at *The Washington Post*. As I entered the huge building at 1513-21 L Street N.W. on my first day, the memory of my Columbia University professor John Hohenberg, who had told me, "You've got so many handicaps, you'll probably make it," prompted a tiny roar inside me. He had been referring to my race and gender. My very person—separate from my abilities—could hamper my probability of success. I pushed aside that thought as I pressed the button for the fifth-floor newsroom. My initial nervousness made me feel a bit like a lone soldier about to face an army, or a fledgling swimmer getting ready to dive into an ocean where she would have to learn to swim while the waves roared relentlessly toward the shore. I tried to appear cool and calm as I walked into the newsroom. It was no time to ponder handicaps. I was entering a new world—a complicated, fast-moving newsroom dominated by white men and where the sparse number of white women were mostly marooned on an island called For and About Women, a section of the newspaper filled with social froth about rich white women like Perle Mesta, the famed Washington hostess.

I put on my game face, walked past desks with typewriters and strewn with newspapers, books, phones, and six-ply paper (typing paper with multiple carbon sheets for copies), past men and an occasional woman, and made my way to the City Desk—a long, dark-brown desk situated in the Metropolitan section. I spotted the city editor, Ben Gilbert, who had interviewed me at Columbia

and been largely responsible for hiring me. I walked over, smiled, and extended my hand, which he took cordially. He introduced me to the assistant editors and showed me to my desk.

In graduate school, journalists in training said *The Washington Post* was run like the Democratic Party and *The New York Times* like the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. This was because Washington was the world's political power center and the editorial pages of *The Washington Post* were seen as liberal and civil libertarian but as arbitrarily managed as the Democratic Party. (Liberal in those days did not mean Blacks and women were well represented in the newspaper's reporting and editing staffs.) *The New York Times* was in the nation's financial and cultural capital and some of its journalists were our teachers at Columbia University, but in its internal management, *The Times* was as rife with intrigue and drama as the cantankerous labor union.

The Washington Post historian Chalmers Roberts called *The Washington Post* of that era internationalist and liberal. It started in 1877 as "a Democratic Daily" and changed hands five times before Eugene Meyer, a visionary Republican, purchased it at a bankruptcy sale in 1933. In 1954, *The Washington Post* acquired and merged with the rival *Times-Herald* in a financial and circulation triumph that solidified *The Washington Post* as the leading newspaper in Washington. Its staff in 1961 numbered more than 850—including news-editorial, business, and production employees. As a business corporation, as well as a newspaper, it was on the upswing.

Ben and I had agreed that I would become a general assignment reporter as I simultaneously got my "sea legs" as a daily journalist. I had come to the newspaper with the same credentials as its white journalists, and I did not want to be stereotyped as qualified to cover only black stories. I thought it wise to be seen as a reporter who could handle any story I was assigned. I saw myself as one of the new-style, aggressive black Americans moving up in Washington

and elsewhere and who represented the change in our people—not like the old-style conservative black appointees in government prepared to work for whites within the existing system of gradualism.

I immediately faced prejudice outside and inside the tension-filled newsroom, as one of only three black journalists and the first African American woman. (Two African American men, Luther P. Jackson Jr. and Wallace H. Terry, were already there.) When I showed up to cover some stories, people often didn't believe I was a reporter. One day, I was assigned to write about the one hundredth birthday of a white woman who lived in one of the high-rise apartment buildings in a swank northwest section west of Rock Creek Park, a dividing line between black and white Washington. Wearing a proper professional dress with a skirt below the knees and medium heels, I walked briskly past manicured lawns to the front door.

A black doorman in full uniform, including a plumed hat, looked at me coldly. "The maid's entrance is around the back," he said.

"I'm not a maid," I answered icily. "I'm a reporter for *The Washington Post* and here to do a story on a resident's one hundredth birthday party." I gave him the person's name and showed my *Washington Post* ID.

He looked shocked, almost disbelieving, but went inside and spoke to the white desk clerk. After a few minutes, he returned to where he'd left me standing outside the door and reluctantly let me inside the ornate lobby. I walked toward the equally surprised desk clerk, who knew about the party and telephoned the resident's apartment to let her know I was on my way up. The party-givers also looked surprised to see me. I ignored them as I did my reporting and left. The elderly lady liked the story I produced—which ran in the Metro section and *not* in For and About Women—and graciously called *The Washington Post* to thank me the next day. I felt gratified by her call, understanding that she was forced to see

black Americans in a new and different way. Moments like that helped me deal with the many negatives I faced on a daily basis.

Going into white neighborhoods often amounted to an invitation to be abused. My editors would assign me a story for the next day's edition, and, like other reporters, I had only a few hours to get the story, return, and write it before deadline. The inherent segregation of D.C. made it difficult even to travel back and forth to report stories. Standing at the corner of 15th and L Streets a few steps from *The Washington Post* and six blocks from the White House, I would wave frantically for a taxicab, mostly driven by white men, but all would whiz past me. Some would slow down, until the drivers would see my dark-brown skin, when they would press down on their accelerators. By then, I would be fighting back tears, which occasionally broke through in my desperation, until one of those white male drivers would take mercy on me and finally stop. White taxi companies that worked downtown where *The Washington Post* was located didn't hire black drivers.

When I eventually got to my assignment, I did my reporting, and I would again try to flag a cab to get back to the paper to type my story. As time passed, deadlines neared and no taxi stopped, I would start writing my stories out in my reporter's notebook using the Gregg shorthand I had perfected at Ursuline College. I had been one of a group of the first eight African American girls invited to attend the Catholic women's college, as the faculty acknowledged that segregation did not reflect the values of their Catholic faith. Secretarial jobs were a high-reach profession for colored women when I attended Ursuline from 1953 to 1955; the nuns had encouraged me to develop those skills in the welcoming environment of sisters, priests, and fellow students. Now, thanks to them, when I finally secured a cab and got back to *The Washington Post* newsroom, I could quickly transcribe the Gregg symbols, type the story at eighty words per minute, and try to meet my deadline.

On rare occasions, if time permitted, I would call for a Black-owned Capitol Cab with a black driver to pick me up, especially if I was going into black neighborhoods far from downtown. Many black cabs worked only Negro neighborhoods, where they would be assured of passengers; black professionals working in downtown Washington were sparse in those days.

Because of segregation, I couldn't eat in many restaurants in the city. At lunchtime, the only place I could be guaranteed admission was Sholl's Colonial Cafeteria near *The Washington Post*. Sometimes Luther and I would go there because we knew we would be welcome and comfortable.

I never told my editors about these snubs and slights because race was not discussed in the workplace. I felt that complaining would just give the editors a reason not to hire another black woman. I feared they would say, "You can't hire them because they can't get the job done. Cabs won't even pick them up. It's not our fault she didn't make it; the reality of the times just doesn't make it possible." It's hard for those who never experienced life during legal or de facto segregation to imagine it. It's difficult for me to think back to how I felt, not being able to eat in a restaurant of my choice, or taking twice as long to get back and forth to assignments because taxis wouldn't pick me up.

One of the hardest problems for me was being ignored by white colleagues when I saw them on the street. White co-workers might speak to me inside the building but would act as if they didn't know me if we passed on the street or outside the newsroom because they didn't want to acknowledge me in front of other whites. The rejection hurt, and I resented that I had to use valuable creative energy masking my emotions. As an accomplished woman with a graduate degree to face such daily slights, I felt not only pained but "less than," "inferior," "not good enough"—not for what I did or did not do, but simply because of who I was. On the street, I tried to

consciously avoid some people I worked with who had previously ignored me. I would jaywalk, risk being hit by a car, to avoid being humiliated. Inside *The Washington Post*, some white men, but not all, would let me exit the elevator first, as they did white women.

My lot wasn't as bad as that of my black male friends who were firsts in previously whites-only jobs. One told me white women who saw him on the elevator would refuse to enter it alone. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower's only black staff person, E. Frederic Morrow, finally got a job in the White House, women entered his office only in pairs to avoid talk of sexual misconduct.

The newsroom was not always a safe harbor either. My first city editor, Ben Gilbert, was supportive of me, as were several others. However, not everyone in the newsroom had Ben's progressive sense of racial justice. Luther reached out to me and helped me make connections, especially with other female reporters; some of whom were friendly and helpful and others less so. Luther, who specialized in housing and urban affairs, worked at *The Washington Post* from 1959 to 1963. He was the son of a college president, and in 1968, he became the first black faculty member at the Columbia Journalism School. I could talk to him about any problems I encountered in covering assignments, the racial slights, who might be a bigot, and the politics of the newsroom—such as who were considered the best writers or reporters and got the choice assignments.

Still, I was determined not to fail. I was fortunate to have landed a job at *The Washington Post*. It was my first experience working for a daily. I had, by then, worked for three black weekly publications, *The Louisville Defender* from 1953 to 1955, *The Tri-State Defender* in Memphis in 1957, and *JET* magazine in Chicago from late 1957 to mid-1959. However, it had been my ambition to be a daily newspaper journalist. That meant I would work for a white-owned publication. There was only one black daily newspaper in the country, *The Atlanta Daily World*, founded in 1932 by W. A. Scott. It was the

first black daily in the U.S. in the twentieth century and the first successful black daily in all U.S. history. I respected *The Atlanta Daily World*, but I didn't want to go back to live in the South. Like so many in my generation, I was feeling the push by Martin Luther King and other leaders to seek places in white corporations that had been closed to those before us. Even at that early stage in my career, I believed in diversity and wanted to bring a black female sensibility to events and stories that a reached a broad audience. Those were the goals of civil rights activism, and I knew my landing a job at a white daily was a step forward for black women. Many young Blacks were eyeing potential careers in white corporations, although racism (and sexism) permeated every American industry. Few women—and far fewer African Americans—held jobs in the daily press anywhere in the nation in 1961.

Ben Gilbert wrote about the nation's capital as I experienced it in an article published in *The Washington Post* in 1967: "[The history of Blacks in Washington] is a story of adversity and a little progress, accompanied by a shocking indifference and some hostility from the mass of whites." Gilbert explained that any progress that had been made after Reconstruction was thwarted in the 1880s. "The segregation of government employment by race, begun at the turn of the century, became policy under Wilson, whose first wife was distressed to see Negroes and whites working together in the Post Office." Gilbert credits Harold Ickes, Franklin D. Roosevelt's secretary of the interior, with laying "the public foundation of today's integrated city by insisting that the facilities under his jurisdiction be used without discrimination." As a result, in the era before civil rights laws were enacted and before affirmative-action policies were in place, Washington was unique in that some Blacks worked in low-level government jobs that created a level of economic security. Across the nation, few Blacks or women worked in white-collar jobs. Black women, generally

forced into the marketplace to help support their families, often worked in jobs beneath their abilities. In the 1950s, relatively few white women worked outside the home.

The place of Blacks in American society was undergoing radical change when I started working at *The Washington Post*, and I wanted to be part of telling the story of trials, trauma, and, I hoped, transformation. If black men and women could risk their lives to break the chains of fear and second-class citizenship in the land of our birth, I could try to integrate the white media industry and bring a black female perspective that was missing from daily newspapers. The Legal Defense and Educational Fund of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had pushed for years for an end to racial segregation in public education. In 1954, the Supreme Court outlawed school segregation, and black Southerners had been on the move, pushing against massive white resistance in the South. In December 1955, Rosa Parks had refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had stepped reluctantly but boldly onto the stage of history. He had become a Moses to lead Blacks in nonviolent protest out of the bondage of Jim Crow that had kept white feet on their necks for nearly a century after slavery's end.

In 1957 after my graduation from Lincoln University, which had been started by black soldiers decades earlier, I became a rookie reporter for *The Tri-State Defender*, and traveled to Little Rock, Arkansas, after my boss, L. Alex Wilson, was brutally beaten when he covered the integration of Central High School. The black students would successfully integrate the all-white high school only after President Eisenhower reluctantly sent in federal troops to enforce the nation's laws in accordance with the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation. White Southerners were horrified when paratroopers formed a protective ring around the black children and walked them into the school, as soldiers

stood at attention around the building. One white onlooker called this forced desegregation the darkest day in the South.

When my boss was severely beaten in Little Rock, the white mob didn't know he was a reporter. They thought he was the parent of one of the children. L. Alex Wilson died prematurely about four years after he was attacked by the white mob in Little Rock, and his death made the hate and the violence of whites personal to me. It almost sickened me to my stomach that a misunderstanding by white parents could bring premature death to someone I knew. I felt helpless. I felt angry. By the time of my first days at *The Washington Post*, I had probably started to turn that anger inward, in what would be an ongoing issue in my life, depression. At *The Washington Post*, I often reported on tough subjects. Anger at injustice and melancholy were a normal part of the work. But the case of Mr. Wilson was an aberration; I was such a young reporter, just twenty. Working for him in Memphis at *The Tri-State Defender* was my first civil rights reporting experience. I was not a yeller and a screamer. I felt a kind of helplessness to make change at that point.

On February 1, 1960, seven months before I entered Columbia University, four black men from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College—Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond—staged the first sit-in in a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. Black college students began sitting in at segregated lunch counters. Old folks and children were soon fighting segregation by gasping for air against the pressure of water hoses and standing stoically as vicious dogs snapped at them, pulled against leashes held by hostile Southern police.

As I was beginning my final semester at Columbia University, before I came to *The Washington Post*, black activism was exploding in the South:

On January 6, 1961, after a two-year battle by the NAACP, a federal judge ordered Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes admitted