

Diversity Gazette

The Legacy of Hortense McClinton

By Katie Geith

For this issue of the Diversity Gazette, I delved into the life of Hortense McClinton, Carolina's first Black faculty member. She's still alive (105 years old!) and is now peacefully retired in Silver Spring, Maryland. But the inspiring story of her career shows her determination and dedication to advancing equality.

Born on August 27, 1918, McClinton grew up in Boley, Oklahoma. Her career trajectory was shaped by an impactful encounter in the 8th grade when a Black social worker spoke to her class, sparking her desire to pursue the same path.

In 1936, she enrolled at Howard University and earned a bachelor's degree in sociology. After graduation, she worked at the Wharton Center, a settlement house that served Black communities in North Philadelphia. In 1941, McClinton earned her master's in social work at the University of Pennsylvania, becoming the third Black student to graduate there. Later in her career, McClinton became the first Black social worker at the Durham County Department of Social Services in 1954 and subsequently took on a role at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Durham, becoming the first Black professional staff member there as well. At the hospital, her responsibilities included serving as a research supervisor and mentoring students from UNC's School of Social Work during their clinical rotations.

Initially offered a position at the UNC School of Social Work in 1964, McClinton declined the offer due to the uncertain funding of the role. However, she accepted a

tenure-track faculty position in 1966, becoming the first Black faculty member at Carolina. As a professor, she revolutionized the social work curriculum by introducing the study of institutional racism and emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing issues like racism, sexism, and economic oppression in the field.

McClinton's impact extended beyond the classroom as she advocated for job opportunities for Black employees at UNC. She also worked to advance inclusivity by serving on various committees, such as the Committee on the Status of Women and the Chancellor's Committee on the Status of Minorities and the Disadvantaged. She retired in 1984, leaving a lasting legacy at Carolina.

Recognized as a "Social Work Pioneer" by the National Association of Social Workers, McClinton received other awards such as the Faculty Service Award from the UNC General Alumni Association in 2021 and a Legacy Award for distinguished service from the university's Black Faculty and Staff Caucus in 2009.

In 2022, McClinton's contributions were honored with the naming of McClinton Residence Hall on campus. She has also had several awards named for her, including the Hortense K. McClinton Faculty Award (given by the Black Student Movement at UNC), the Hortense McClinton Outstanding Faculty Staff Award (given by the UNC General Alumni Association's Black Alumni Reunion), and the Hortense McClinton Senior Service Award (given by the Kappa Omicron Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta sorority). The School of Social Work also established the Hortense McClinton Legacy Scholarship, providing support to graduate students who, like McClinton, are the first in their families to pursue advanced education and embody her pioneering spirit.



History of the Gazette

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