MAY 1979

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A Tribute to Josephine Butler, Activist

John Hanrahan

Josephine Butler, one of the founders of the Adams Morgan Organization, trade unionist, chair of the DC statehood Party and a widely respected footsoldier in the battle for peace and freedom, will be honored at a special testimonial this Sunday, May 6, at All Souls Church, 16th & Harvard NW (7:30-10:00 pm).

The Jo Butler story tells us a lot not only about Jo, but about our city and our country. We're proud to be able to run it in this issue and the next, because we think that here life can serve as an inspiration to every person who sets out on the long, long march for social change.

Persons interested in attending the testimonial should call 462-2054 for ticket information.

Josephine Dorothy Butler was born January 24, 1920, in Poplar Hill, an area of southern Prince George's County, Md., now known as Brandywine. Her parents, Helen and Joseph Jenifer, were sharecroppers, and Jo and her five sisters and four brothers all were working in the tobacco fields by the age of six.

Because sharecropping demanded hard work from the entire family well into the fall and again early in the spring, the black sharecroppers children missed much of the school year. So, much of their schooling came before they were six years old from a "progressive and understanding teacher," Matilda Wilson.

"She knew she had to teach the children at an early age, before they had to go to work in the fields," Jo recalls. "She taught us basic education, the rudiments of family living and how to use a typewriter. She knew that there would be a great need for people who knew how to type. And, if you knew how to type, she knew people would have to hire you, regardless of the color of your hands."

In Jo's community, there were no public schools for blacks. Jo's great uncle, Wheeler Makal, donated land, and black parents built their own school that went only to the seventh grade. So, when Jo finished elementary school, there was no place else for her to go.

But about two years later, with Franklin D. Roosevelt as President, federal funds were provided to build Frederick Douglass High School for black children in Upper Marlboro.

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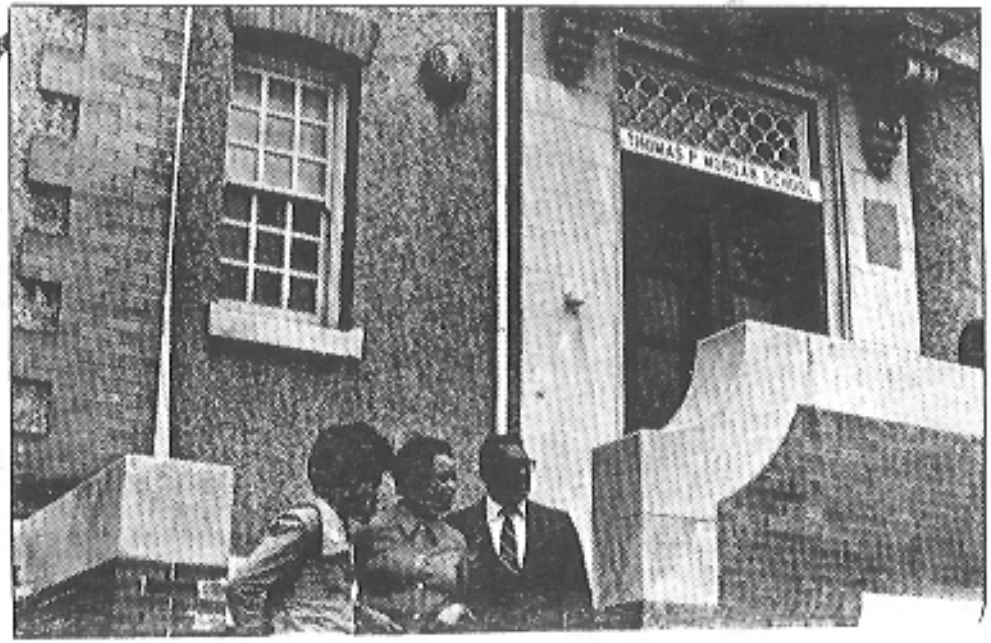
ROCK CREEK MONITOR
May 3, 1979

Fifty Thousand Expected for Weekend Anti-Nuclear Protest



The Jo Butler Story

(Continued from page 1)

The structure itself was not built until 1935, so in the interim black children attended classes in five shanties in the woods two miles from Upper Marlboro.

As Jo recalls, white people "tried to discourage us, sometimes in violent ways, from even going to high school. They saw that if we got more education we would go to the city and get better jobs and then white farm owners would have no one to work in their fields" under exploitive conditions.

There were threats to black families; there were stonings of buses that carried black children of Poplar Hill to Upper Marlboro; jobs suddenly became scarce for those blacks who sent their children to the high school. Many black families were forced to give in to this pressure. There were times when Jo was afraid to get on the bus, but her family stood firm and gave her the courage to persevere.

Although Jo's father had regularly obtained work as a well-digger, veterinarian and carpenter, in addition to his farm work, he suddenly found that white people would no longer hire him—or, would not pay him for work he did.

So, Jo's mother had to get housework jobs in Washington. Because of the distance to Washington, and because the employers demanded that servants live on the job, Jo's mother would usually be able to come home only every other Tuesday. "My mother saw me and the rest of the family only for half days every other week from the time I was 12 until I got married at 14 and moved into Washington," Jo says.

But there were happy times, too. "My mother and father were natural teachers," Jo says. "My father would make all of us kids read him different parts of the newspaper each day. I always read the political news to him. And he would quiz us on what we had read to make sure we understood it."

Jo's mother encouraged the family's creative side.

"My mother constantly had us making quilts, writing skits and little plays," Jo says. "My family did most of the entertaining for the PTA and other community groups. At home, we would play charades, or sit around and make up stories. One child would start a story, then another child was expected to pick it up and tell a little bit more. And so on through the whole family. The story would go in all kinds of crazy directions and we'd laugh ourselves silly. We still do that when my brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews get together with my mother who still lives in Brandywine." (Her father is now deceased.)

At age 14, a turning point came in Jo's life. She was married and moved with her husband to Washington. Jo's first three jobs in Washington were at laundries. Her husband was a member of the laborers and hod carriers union, and later became a union steward. "I learned a lot about unions and organizing from him," she says.

Still, Jo recalls, she wasn't much of an activist until she attended a conference in the later 1930' at which the speakers were Paul Robeson, the great singer, actor, athlete and foremost, black freedom fighter; and Henry A. Wallace, a Cabinet officer and later Vice President under Roosevelt, and in 1948 the Progressive Party's presidential candidate.

Upon hearing Robeson and Wallace speak, Jo says, she realized that "that was my whole world. It was like an awakening of something that was dormant." In the coming years, she often heard Paul Robeson speak at forums, union rallies, neighborhood gatherings, and civil rights meetings—and regarded him as someone all people should try to model thier lives upon.

Around 1940, Jo began working in government cafeterias. Cafeteria workers were very low paid and during Jo's time as a cafeteria worker, union organizing was started. Eventually, after Jo left to take another job, government cafeteria workers were successful in organizing the union.

Jo left her cafeteria job in 1942 to work as a junior clerk in the Veterans Administration and seemed on her way to a career in the federal government. But it was not to be. Instead, Jo became one of the many thousands of Cold War casualties in the U.S. government's war against political dissent.

"It was 1949," Jo recalls. "The government had just begun imposing loyalty tests on its workers. I had taken the test and hadn't given it another thought. Then I took a week off from work, and while away I got a telegram from the V.A. telling me to resign."

Jo couldn't understand why she was on some "loyalty list." Had her personal life been in different shape at the time, Jo now feels, she would have fought the V.A. order. But her marriage was breaking up. She had left her husband—"something a black woman didn't do at the time"—and was physically afraid of him. For her own safety and peace of mind, Jo decided to leave Washington. She resigned from the V.A. and took a live-in job doing housework in Bethesda.

In 1951, Jo returned to Washington. Thousands of new Federal jobs were opening up then, and Jo felt she would have no trouble getting one. But all her applications were rejected. When she would press for an explanation, the word would come back that she was "not qualified." Then the full import of the V.A. action struck her: she was blacklisted from government employment.

Jo went back to work in government cafeterias on a part-time basis. During the same period, to supplement her income, she worked evenings as a barmaid. She became deeply involved in cafeteria workers' union activities when union officials attempted to raise dues for part-time workers to the same level as full-time workers—this despite wide discrepancies in the benefits and amounts of pay part-timers and full-timers earned each month.

Sadly, Jo's health began to deteriorate in the middle 1950s. She spent almost the entire period from 1959 until 1963 in bed, either at her apartment on New Hampshire Ave., N.W. or in the hospital. She was in pain, suffered convulsions and lost 55 pounds. Yet, Jo's doctors repeatedly misdiagnosed her illness.

It wasn't until August, 1962 that Jo's doctors went back to her original x-rays and learned that she had tuberculosis of the kidney. By this time, Jo had spent $10,000 of her own on her illness, in addition to health insurance money.

Jo went home in September 1962 and, finally being properly treated, got out of bed to stay on November 22, 1963, the day President Kennedy was assassinated.

A Tribute to Josephine Butler, Activist

On May 6, more than two hundred people gathered at All Souls Church (16th & Harvard NW) to honor longtime Adams Morgan activist Josephine Butler.

This is part two of a three part series on Jo's life.

John Hanrahan

In 1967, Jo Butler organized her co-workers at the D.C. Lung Association into Local 2 of the Office and Professional Employees International Union, making it the first lung association in the United States to have union representation. Today, she still is the shop steward at the Association, and was elected the union's delegate to the Greater Washington Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO, in 1974 and re-elected in 1977. She has served on the Local's executive board, and is a member of the Local's Community Services Committee.

From 1964 to 1968, Jo served as Democratic chairperson for Precinct 15 and party liaison person for six other precincts. But the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago convinced her "that there was something better I could be doing with my time politically."

So, when there began to be serious talk about organizing a D.C. Statehood Party, Jo "jumped right in." A group of 40 persons held the first Statehood Party discussions in December 1970. Afterwards, Jo was so excited that she went to the D.C. Board of Elections on December 7, 1970 and convinced a skeptical clerk to allow her to register in the Statehood Party even though the party did not legally exist!

In 1971, in the first election for D.C.'s non-voting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives, Jo and other statehood advocates drafted Julius Hobson to run for the seat. Hobson, the brilliant civil rights and anti-war activist, had become the District's first elected official city-wide in more than 100 years when he was elected at-large to the Board of Education in 1968. Running against a formidable field, Hobson lost the delegate election, but polled a respectable 15,000 votes.

More importantly, Hobson's showing, in Jo's words, "helped create a whole new party dedicated to the idea of statehood and political and economic equality for the District of Columbia," and marked the emergence of a local political party considerably more progressive than the traditional two parties.

In 1974, Jo and Hobson ran for City Council seats on the Statehood Party ticket. Hobson was elected, while Jo finished fifth for an at-large seat with 13,774 votes. In 1976, Jo again ran at-large and polled an impressive 27,487 votes, finishing third in a race for two seats. Most significant was her percentage—12.5 percent of the votes cast—in an election in which her campaign spent just $1,800 and in which she was ignored by the major news media.

Jo was elected chairperson of the Statehood Party in early 1977, shortly after Hobson's death. When the party chose Board of Education member Hilda Mason to fill Hobson's City Council seat, Jo worked her usual long hours to help win the subsequent special election for Hilda. In 1978, Hilda, a Statehood Party founder and long-time community activist, won reelection, again with Jo's invaluable help.

The Statehood Party has been far from Jo's only major activity in recent years. One of her favorites concerned her effort a decade ago with Bill Treanor (later a school board member) in taking control of the old number 2 Police Precinct Advisory Council. Treanor was the founder of Runaway House, and Jo served on its board of directors.

During the same period, Jo was working with Julius Hobson, Marion Barry, Sam Abbott and scores of other citizens to fight successfully against construction of the North Central Freeway and Three Sisters Bridge Projects, which would have devastated entire neighborhoods of poor and working-class people.

Next Issue: the Founding of the Adams Morgan Organization.

Pulling a Few Strings in Dupont Circle

(Continued from Page 1)

Stephano Young. She is the solo altoist at Annunciation Church and is featured on jazz bassist Derwyn Holder's 1978 release. Her richly toned voice, combined with her extensive training make this comic parody a treat for opera buffs and opera disdainers alike.

The second show, "Hand Off," is an abstract expression of artistic violence, independence and ego-smashing (I said it was abstract). As an exercise, it is a sophisticated outgrowth of the shadow games we all played when young.

The last show, "The Puppet President," provides the highlight of the evening. The puppets, realistic caricatures of presidential hopefuls, are remarkable constructions in themselves, plaster-cast from sculptured clay models. But the campaign promises of Jimmy, Teddy, and Jerry, not to mention the few surprise contenders, are a satirical extravaganza sure to keep Washington audiences in stitches. In true democratic fashion, the audience determines the victor, though our choice is as manipulated as the puppets themselves—perhaps the final twist?

Playing through the 20th, "Puppets After Dark" provides relief from standard Washington dinner-theater fare. For information call: 927-5599.

Josephine Butler, Community Activist

This is the third and final part of a series on longtime neighborhood activist Josephine Butler.

In the early 1970s, Jo Butler also worked to help put together the Adams-Morgan Organization which quickly earned the reputation as one of the most effective neighborhood-based activist groups in the country.

Jo also was a prime figure in the effort to maintain community control at Morgan School. In 1968, Jo was asked by Bishop Marie Reed, a pioneer in Morgan's community control effort, to serve on the Morgan School Board. Jo was elected to the Morgan board and the post of vice chairperson. Then, suddenly, Bishop Reed died, and Jo became chairperson of the Morgan board. Jo served as chairperson for one year and vice chairperson for two years.

Jo's activities also extend to working for world peace.

In 1974, the day Richard Nixon resigned the presidency, Jo was winging her way to the Soviet Union. Her visit there reminded her again of "what responsibility I have to my country to improve conditions here and make it contribute to world peace." And the trip brought her thoughts back to Paul Robeson, who is recognized as a hero by the Soviet Union but who was villified and harassed by his own government.

In 1976, shortly after Robeson's death, Jo organized an inspiring memorial service honoring him. Jo says she then realized that "a true monument to Paul Robeson would be a society in his name to teach what he stood for and to carry on his work for world peace, friendship and understanding among all peoples."

With that, the Paul Robeson Society was born in Washington. With Jo's help, Paul Robeson Societies have been or are established in Grenada, Jamaica, Zambia, Ethiopia, the Irish Republic and Baltimore.

In Washington, the Society has entertained delegations from the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Guyana, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The society has also arranged for troupes of Soviet dancers to perform at schools and community events.

As a further tribute to Robeson, Jo arranged to have the World Peace Council meet in the United States for the first time in the 30-year existence of the Council. The Council, which represents 140 nations, had been barred from the country by U.S. Government Cold Warriors in the early 1950s. Council representatives from 43 countries came to Washington for a four-day conclave in January 1978. As a follow-up to that meeting, Jo was invited to Athens, Greece to speak at a conference on peace and cooperation among Mediterranean nations.

Jo's interest in all the peoples of the world has also taken her to Grenada. Some years ago, she met some Grenadians who were attending Howard University and she then visited that West Indies' country of 100,000 inhabitants. On a second visit, she became aware of the growing repression of Sir Eric Gairy's government.

Then, in March on this year, Jo got a long-distance call from a Grenadan friend. The Gairy government had been overthrown, and a progressive government installed. While many Americans had not even heard of Grenada, Jo Butler could be counted on to know its new leaders!

In addition to her other activities, Jo served on the Mayor's Health Planning Advisory Committee from 1973 to 1976, on the D.C. Human Rights Commission from 1972 to 1978 and on the D.C. Coordinating Committee for International Women's Year.

When Pressmen's Local 6 went on strike at the *Washington Post* in October 1975, Jo was among the first community leaders to support Local 6's unsuccessful effort to prevent management from busting the union, and was a regular speaker at pressmen's rallies.

In addition, Jo continues to work at the D.C. Lung Association where she is constantly busy providing health education to schools and community groups. In her "spare time," Jo can be seen at any one of a dozen meetings, or on a picket line or demonstration somewhere—for freeing the Wilmington 10, against the Chilean junta, in support of workers' and tenants' rights.

When one thinks of Jo Butler, one can't help but recall the line from the song memorializing the life of the legendary I.W.W. martyr, Joe Hill. Changed just a little, it would read:

"Where people everywhere defend their rights,
It's there you'll find Jo Butler."