

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CHAPTER

National Lawyers Guild



Second Annual Community Justice Awards Dinner

Honorees

Selma Samols

Charles and Hilda Mason

Saturday, February 22, 1986





Hilda Mason



Hilda Mason

Charles and Hilda Mason

"In the '60s," recalls Sam Smith, editor of *The Progressive Review*, "you weren't supposed to trust anyone over 30. What I discovered, though, after looking around this town at the time, was that the key activists back then were not only over 30, but a good deal over 30. People like Julius Hobson, Sammie Abbott, Selma Rein, Hilda and Charlie Mason. A lot of the younger activists sometimes assumed change was going to happen overnight. Having people around like Hilda and Charlie, people who are in it for the long haul, provided a greater balance for the younger people."

While some other activists of that period who have gone into electoral politics have lost sight of some of their original ideals, Hilda and Charlie have remained consistently true to the principles Sam Smith observed in them two decades ago.

With their differences in race, in social class at birth, and in background, Hilda's and Charlie's lives form a perfect blend of social conscience and hard work that have inspired and encouraged other activists for the last 20 years. This is the story of those two unique individuals.

Hilda Howland M. Mason was born in Campbell County, Virginia on June 14, 1916. Her great grandmother on her mother's side had been a slave. Hilda's mother, Martha, was a teacher. Her father, Joel, lacked formal education but despite this became an enterprising small businessman who at various times ran a country store, operated a junk business, handled real estate and operated a funeral home.

Hilda's parents were, she says, "religiously involved in human rights. They struggled to help people any way they could to make sure that others had enough food, clothes and other necessities of life."

Also, as Hilda recalls, Campbell County was "Klan country," and Hilda's parents helped fight the Klan. On one occasion, Hilda remembers, her father hurriedly arranged to get a young Black man out of town to avoid a lynching.

Although the Klan and degrading racial segregation were part of her young life, Hilda remembers that a number of whites in the community were openly supportive of her father, thereby affording him some measure of protection. For their part, Hilda's parents helped needy whites as well as needy Blacks. This experience, she notes, taught her the valuable lesson that people of good will can work together and help one another, regardless of race.

While growing up, Hilda was assisted in her education by the efforts of a group of New England white women who helped provide better education for southern Black girls. The Howland in Hilda's name is from Elizabeth Howland, a woman from an old New England family who paid her tuition to attend high school at Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Upon finishing high school at age 16, Hilda began to teach in Virginia. She later worked as a waitress and dishwasher to pay her way through St. Paul's Normal School and Industrial Institute in Lawrenceville, Virginia, where she studied secondary education. She then resumed teaching in Virginia. Hilda says she originally went into education because "there were few other jobs Black women could get into."

In 1945, following an unsuccessful marriage, Hilda moved to Washington with her two daughters, Carolyn and Joyce. She worked at several jobs while also attending Miners Teachers College, from which she received her B.S. degree in 1952. She received an M.A. in 1957 from the District of Columbia Teachers College.

WE SALUTE THE GUILD AND ITS HONOREES

CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE

BILL MONTROSS

DEBORAH SCHINDLER

Congratulations
and Thanks to
Selma, Hilda, and Charlie

With Special
Appreciation to
**CHARLES N. MASON,
JR., Esq.**

for all your hard work
that made
McSurely v. McClellan
a Victory for all the people

with love,
Margaret Herring
(formerly, Margaret McSurely)

TO HILDA, CHARLIE
AND SELMA

A NOBLE THREESOME

Burton Wechsler

The Labor Panel
of the D.C. Chapter
of the National
Lawyers Guild
Congratulates
**Selma Samols, Hilda Mason
and Charles Mason**

Hilda returned to full-time teaching in 1952 at Van Ness Elementary School. She moved over to Shadd Elementary School from 1954 to 1962, and then served as supervisory instructor at LaSalle Laboratory School from 1962-1965; as counselor at LaSalle from 1965-1967; as assistant director, Adams Morgan Community School Project, 1967-1968; as assistant principal, Morgan Community School, 1968-1969, and as assistant principal, Adams Community School, 1970-1971.

In addition to establishing herself as a premiere educator, Hilda in the 1950s and early 1960s was also becoming increasingly active outside the classroom. She helped organize the Washington Teachers Union in her school; was involved in the successful effort to desegregate D.C.'s restaurants, and was active in a wide variety of other civil rights activities.

It was during this period—in 1957—that she met Charles Mason. Eight years later they were married, and began a unique partnership that has been nurtured by love and social activism.

*Congratulations to the D.C.
Chapter of the National Lawyers
Guild for its commitment to peace
and civil rights. The selection of
the 1986 award recipients
underscores continued adherence
to this dedication.*

Lorin E. Kerr, M.D.



Charles Mason

Charles N. Mason, Jr. was born in Boston in 1911, the son of Emily Reed and Charles N. Mason. His mother died when Charlie was 9 years old. His father was a successful business executive who was associated with General Electric and several of its subsidiaries.

Charlie attended Harvard and was graduated with a degree in engineering and applied sciences. In 1938, he began working in Boston for the U.S. Civil Service Commission as, among other things, an examiner of applications for jobs in engineering and physics.

With the outbreak of World War II, Charlie took a leave from his federal job to return to Harvard to aid in the war effort by teaching electronics to military personnel and civilians. At war's end, Charlie went back to the Civil Service Commission but, as veterans with job preference rights returned to the agency, he was squeezed out of his position. Accepting a post similar to his commission position, with the Naval Research Laboratories, Charlie moved to Washington, D.C. in 1946. He retired from government service in 1968.

While with the federal government, Charlie became a civil rights activist. Paul Bennett, former chairman of the D.C. chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and a friend of Charlie for almost 40 years, recalls: "I suspect there were times when Charlie and I were the only two people on the picket line."

Bennett, a retired government research physicist who now lives on a farm in Alabama, was best man at Hilda's and Charlie's wedding and was also active with them in CORE and at All Souls Unitarian Church. He remembers picketing with Charlie at the old D.C. Transit Company to protest the company's racist hiring practices; going with Charlie to the old YMCA to object to the Y's whites-only policy; and working with Charlie on any

number of projects to break down racial barriers in jobs, housing and schools.

In addition to his outside activities, Charlie used his government position to help bring more minorities into federal jobs. Although he didn't realize it at the time, documents he obtained recently under the Freedom of Information Act showed there were those in his agency who didn't like his civil rights work either on or off the job—and they were apparently using it against him in job performance ratings.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Charlie became quite knowledgeable about the legal side of the civil rights movement. Combining this with his expertise in employment practices gained through his federal post, Charlie regularly advised Clarence Mitchell of the NAACP as to which job discrimination cases stood the best chance of succeeding in court.

As Hilda recalls that period, "Charlie came to know so much about civil rights law that I kept encouraging him to go to law school." When he retired from federal service in 1968, Charlie, at age 57, entered Howard University as a first-year law student. He later received his law degree and also joined the National Lawyers Guild.

With one notable exception, Charlie has not practiced law. Rather, he has used his legal knowledge and research skills to assist Hilda legislatively and politically in her service, first, for five-and-a-half years on the D.C. Board of Education, and, for the last nine years on the D.C. Council. He has never received one penny of taxpayer's money for his full-time public service with Hilda.

The one exception to Charlie's non-courtroom activities was his work as a volunteer backup counsel to Morton Stavis, of the Center for Constitutional Rights, in support of Alan and Margaret McSurely (now Margaret Herring) in their

suit against a former Kentucky prosecutor and the late Senator John McClellan, among others. Charlie began working on the case in 1972—more than 10 years before it finally went to trial.

As organizers of poor people in Pike County, Kentucky in the 1960s, Margaret and Al had been arrested and charged with sedition. The sedition charges (and subsequent contempt of Congress charges against the McSurelys) were thrown out by the courts. For their part, Margaret and Al sued, seeking damages for an unconstitutional search and seizure of documents at their house, for invasion of privacy and for violation of their First Amendment rights.

In an early 1983 decision, a U.S. District Court jury in the District of Columbia ruled in favor of Margaret and Al—who later received a monetary settlement for damages from the former Kentucky prosecutor whom they had sued.

"Charlie came to our first hearing," recalls Margaret. "He asked if there was anything he could do, so we took him up on it. He was so invaluable over the years, I really don't think we would have been as successful without his help. He was an excellent researcher, and he was always ready and willing to do whatever needed to be done at a particular time. He's so modest that he'll never take credit for anything, but he should be very proud of the role he played in this case."

After they were married, Hilda and Charlie continued to strive quietly and effectively for human rights. Among their many activities, Hilda and Charlie worked with other activists through CORE and Friends of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to help provide food, housing, clothing, medical care and transportation for people who came to Washington to demonstrate and to lobby for civil rights.

As Hilda's involvement in community issues grew, she was urged to run for the D.C. Board of Education by Julius Hobson, the city's most dynamic and progressive civil rights and education activist. Hilda had worked with Hobson on a number of matters including his successful landmark lawsuit on the unequal treatment of Black students in the city's public schools. She was elected in 1971 and was re-elected in 1975.

While on the school board, Hilda helped bring a more efficient management system to the board and pressed for the issues so important to her—among other things, greater involvement of parents and the community in the education decision-making process, adequate funding for schools, periodic health examinations of students, and the equalization of resources between schools in lower-income areas of the city and schools in more affluent areas.

To attorney David A. Splitt, who knew Charlie and Hilda when Splitt was general counsel at the school board, the key to what keeps Charlie and Hilda true to their course, in addition to their idealism and their consciences, is their love for each other. "I've never seen two people more devoted to one another," says Splitt. "Their relationship is absolutely remarkable."

Regarding his view of Hilda as an elected official, Splitt adds: "In many ways, Hilda sees the time she spent in the classroom as a teacher as the most important work she ever did. She has a tremendous sense of conscience and a desire to improve schools. And she can transfer her ideals from the classroom to the world stage without shifting gears. To her, it's all the same. She devotes the same energy to fighting small injustices as she does to big ones. She can't stand injustice and she can't stand seeing people get stepped on, whether it's children in classrooms or the victims of apartheid in South Africa."

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During the same period when Hilda was beginning her work on the school board, the D.C. Statehood Party was being organized under the leadership of Julius Hobson. Hilda's and Charlie's dream of statehood began to move closer to reality in 1980 when voters approved an initiative providing for the calling of a local constitutional convention to draw up a state constitution.

Hilda was easily elected as a delegate to the convention which in May 1982 adopted a constitution regarded as the most progressive in the country. The constitution was later approved by the voters, and a petition for statehood is still pending before Congress.

When Hobson died in 1977 while serving as a Statehood Party member of the D.C. Council, Hilda was chosen by the party to succeed him. Later in the year, she won an election to fill out the term through 1978. Hilda retained the seat in the 1978 and 1982 elections, and is up for reelection again later this year. On the council, Hilda has served as chair of the Committee on Education and as a D.C. representative on the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

As she has done throughout her life, Hilda has stayed true to her values while also carrying out the nuts-and-bolts duties of a council member. She has, among many issues, pushed for quality education and adequate funding for the public schools, supported rent control and increases in tenants' rights, and worked to prevent reductions in city services brought about by Reagan administration cuts in federal support for human services programs. She also worked for passage of the successful nuclear weapons freeze initiative, and sponsored legislation to prohibit the transportation of nuclear wastes through the District of Columbia.

Throughout Hilda's years on the school board and council, Charlie has doggedly supported her behind the scenes with ideas, advice—and research.

"Charlie is one of the greatest detail persons I have ever seen," comments Sam Smith, editor of *The Progressive Review*. "The amount of data the guy can retain is unbelievable. He must be the prototype of the Apple MacIntosh."

Hilda's and Charlie's joint commitment to education, civil rights, peace, women's, disarmament and community issues are well reflected in the various organizations to which Hilda belongs, or has belonged. These include:

District of Columbia Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, D.C. Citizens for Better Public Education, Washington Urban League, NAACP, Neighbors Inc., Women Strike for Peace, National Women's Political Caucus, the National Organization for Women, and the National Council of Negro Women, among many others. She has also served on advisory boards for several organizations, including the Institute for Policy Studies and SANE.

The Mason's long-time friend, Paul Bennett, sees Hilda and Charlie as "quite a team. They always do everything as a couple. They hardly ever take a vacation. They're forever going, forever running, because they care so much about people and about their community. They believe in helping people in whatever way they can. They've helped people get training for jobs. They've helped young people get into colleges. They've helped me personally in tough times. And they do it all without any thought of personal gain or publicity."

When you ask Hilda what has made her remain true to her principles over the years, she cites the example of her parents and the tragic death some years ago at age 13 of her grandson, Nestor, who was extremely close to Hilda and Charlie. Nestor frequently joined Hilda and Charlie on the picket lines, and she often thinks of him and her parents when she is confronted with a decision.

"It's in the marrow of my bones, it is in my blood," says Hilda of her philosophy. "Almost every step I take, I feel like I'm doing what my mother and father would have done. And my grandson, Nestor, I feel like I'm walking in his footsteps, too. I can't forget where I came from. I can't forget what my parents did to preserve their own lives. Although I'm living comfortably now, I'm not going to forget how it once was for me, and I'm not going to turn my back on people who aren't as fortunate as I am."

**GREETINGS TO
THE NATIONAL
LAWYERS GUILD
AND ITS HONOREES**

MAGGIO and KATTAR, P.C.

*Charlie and Hilda Mason
combine their energies and
skills to bring about social
change. Their love for each
other mirrors their love for
humanity.*

