

An Edifying Maverick

By Harold E. Cheatham

Lucy Diggs Slowe swam against the tide of sexism, racism, and elitism. The African-American trailblazer (1885-1937) proved her mettle in education on numerous fronts: the first dean of women at Howard University; the first president of the National Association of College Women; founding principal of the first junior high school for black students in Washington, D.C.; a founder and the first president of Alpha Kappa Alpha, the first sorority for black women in the country. Her superlatives even extend to athletics; a 17-time tennis champion, she was the first African-American woman to win a major sports title, the American Tennis Association's inaugural national tournament.

It makes sense, then, as Carroll L. L. Miller and Anne S. Pruitt-Logan meticulously document in their biography of her, *Faithful to the Task at Hand*, that Slowe was strong-willed, and perhaps overbearing, equally smart, wily, charming, sophisticated, elegant, eloquent, clever, humorous, and political. She was, the authors demonstrate, ahead of the times.

Born the youngest of seven children on July 4 in Berryville, Va., Slowe suffered two early blows: her father's death when she was six months old and her mother's five years later. The girl was raised by her maternal aunt and family, initially in Lexington, Va., ultimately in Baltimore, Md. Slowe's success at Baltimore Colored High School commended her for acceptance at Howard, and the English major graduated as class valedictorian in 1908 even while holding down a job to help pay tuition.

After teaching and administrative stints at public secondary schools in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., and after earning a master's degree in English at Columbia University, Slowe returned to Howard in 1922 as dean of women, a new position there. She came to the assignment determined to improve their opportunities, and with the imprimatur of president J. Stanley Durkee, Slowe ordained herself the doyenne, the campus conscience and authority on all things female.

As proxy for her gender, she required equal status with academic deans and expected — demanded — to be consulted about the intersection of their authority and that of her office. This posture succeeded until the university seal was passed in 1926 to Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, the first Howard president of African-American descent, and a conservative with whom the progressive Slowe butted heads. But she soldiered on, intent on ensuring that advancements for women were not impeded by institutional form or function.

Her conflicts with Johnson (she broaching insubordination, he boycotting her highly praised events) and with the board of trustees (neutralizing a summons to account for herself) became the stuff of legend. These internecine battles also amplify a distress for her that derived from a single-minded vigilance against any hint of real or imagined racial indignity or gender inequality. (Curiously, the word sexism seldom appears in this work.) Slowe also might have been the victim of subtle homophobia, exhibited through the insistence that she move on campus, a matter of focus only at the end



of the biography when, upon her death from kidney failure at age 52, colleagues extend sympathies to her companion.

In her fight with Johnson, the tactician in Slowe employed sympathetic faculty colleagues; likeminded cohorts at highly selective, predominantly white schools; and understanding peers from a vast network of contacts at national associations. Nor was the canny survivor above leaking damaging information to the press to further her cause. Indeed, throughout her tenure at Howard, Slowe remained faithful to the task at hand, insisting that the purpose of the university was not to control students — expressly women students — through dense rules but to educate them so they could make informed choices. Her viewpoint partly stemmed from educational philosopher John Dewey's belief in practical experience; self-determination through engagement was especially germane in a country rife with patriarchy and bigotry.

The biographers appropriately hail her as a "competent preceptress" and the best person to take on the role of founding dean of women, but they seem to give a pass to Slowe the firebrand. (Yet it ought to be noted that they scarcely engage in critique and instead present the facts for the reader to interpret.) The sheer rightness and forceful oratory of her presentments form part of this stalwart, it should be pointed out.

As Slowe persevered, so did her biographers. A Howard professor (and alum) began a profile of her for an anthology of notable American women in 1960 but died

before completing it. Miller, a Howard graduate and administrator — and a junior high school pupil of Slowe's — along with a colleague, resumed and expanded the intent. Yet complications arose, causing a hiatus until the 1990s. Dean of the graduate school by then, Miller died in 2003 still immersed in the project. Pruitt-Logan, Professor Emerita of Educational Policy and Leadership at The Ohio State University, and a Howard alum herself, brought the manuscript to fruition. (Full disclosure: she served as my doctoral advisor and is one of my mentors.) The realization of this work is no small feat.

It's a testament to how the tenacious Slowe made the grade and altered the educational landscape. So are the elementary school in Washington, D.C., and the co-ed residence hall at Howard that bear her name. ■



Harold E. Cheatham (Clemson University former chapter president) is Emeritus Dean of the College of Health, Education, and Human Development and Emeritus Professor of Counseling and Education Leadership at Clemson University. He specializes in the psychosocial development of black college students; multicultural counseling and theory; and cultural pluralism. His many publications include *The American Civil Rights Movement: A Documentary*

History (Manchester University Press, 2009) and *Black Families: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Rutgers University Press, 1990). A Senior Fulbright Scholar and former president of the American College Personnel Association, Cheatham earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from Penn State and advanced degrees in counseling/higher education administration from Colgate University (master's) and Case Western Reserve University (doctoral). He is a 2012 Penn State Distinguished Alumni Award recipient. Go online to www.hehd.clemson.edu/cheatham/honors.php or email him at hcheathm@bellsouth.net.