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From Hurt to Healing

By William Douglas
WASHINGTON BUREAU

Bronx minister to bring own experiences to race panel talks

Washington—The Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook first learned the stinging lesson of racism while on her way to school in a largely white Bronx neighborhood that her family integrated.

“I was excited about my first day of school and I invited another young lady to sit next to me on the school bus, and she said, ‘I can’t sit next to you.’ I said why? ‘Because you’re black...my mother said I can’t sit next to one of you.’ ” Cook recalled last week. “It burst my bubble, but it was the beginning of what the rest of my life was going to present.”

More than 30 years later, Cook, 39, brings the painful memory of that bus ride to the table as she and six other members of President Bill Clinton’s advisory board on race relations in America convene their first public meeting Monday.

The meeting launches a yearlong mission to generate a dialogue on the nation’s race relations. Clinton wants the board to eventually propose policy solutions to heal racial tensions, which Clinton contends must be confronted to prepare the nation for the 21st Century.

“I’m going to bring a voice to the table that I believe is urban America, as I’ve lived it, as I’ve experienced racism, as I have experienced some positive steps to remove it,” Cook said.

She sees the meeting as the starting point of an uneasy national conversation that, she says, must deal frankly with the legacy of slavery on African-Americans if it is to succeed.

“The first thing I hope will happen is that we deal with some (issues) honestly, which means there’s going to be some pain,” said Cook, a Baptist minister who founded the Bronx Christian Fellowship last year. “I hope a healing process will happen out of our pain and growth.

When Clinton named is advisory panel, which includes well-known figures such as former Govs. Thomas Keen of New Jersey and William Winter of Mississippi and historian-author John Hope Franklin, several people were surprised with the selection of Cook, who is not well known nationally.

But those who know her were hardly shocked. “There’s a wisdom there beyond her years and beyond her experience,” said former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros, who hired Cook part time to help forge links between the housing agency and the religious community. “The White House knew her, and they may have liked the idea of (appointing) one who is up-and-coming and younger.”

Cook is no stranger to politics. She helped run the New York Assembly campaigns of her brother Charles Johnson of the Bronx, who served from then-Mayor David Dinkins to become the New York City Police Department’s first female chaplain.

It was political curiosity that led Cook to apply for and receive a White House fellowship in 1993-94. Working for the Domestic Policy Council, Cook caught the eye of administration officials, who quickly tapped into her religious expertise, she said.

“They would ask in terms of sensitivity of issues, if they were going to a black church would this be correct to say or how to address this particular audience,” Cook said.

Though not as recognizable as some of her fellow panelists, Cook has forged a reputation within the religious community and in New York City for her church and advocacy work for the poor.

A former television producer who was ordained in 1980, Cook was assigned to the Mariner's Temple, the city's oldest Baptist church. But the church had fallen on hard times: The congregation was down to 60 people, and the American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York was paying its bills.

Cook went out and actively recruited new members, started community outreach programs and installed a weekly "Lunch Hour of Power" service that attracted Wall Streeters to the Lower Manhattan church, church officials said.

By the time she left Mariners' last year, the church was self-supporting with a membership of more than 1,000 in two congregations, according to church officials.

"She's an energetic person, a very creative person who I think will play a major role as a future leader in New York, possibly elected," said Rep. Floyd Flake (D-Queens), an African Methodist Episcopal Church minister and a longtime friend of Cook's.

On the race advisory panel, Cook says she will listen to what Americans have to say about race through Town Hall meetings the panel plans to schedule during the year. She also intends to speak her mind.

For instance, she says discussing slavery is a priority. But she does not join the recent call by some members of Congress that the government issue a formal apology.

"It's beyond an apology now," she said. "Had it happened right after the lynchings or right after the abolition of slavery, that would have been a different thing."

Cook says the panel must be selective about what it addresses.

"Every issue just can't be on the table," she said. "The issue right now is the race question in America and where do we go from here."