

Honoring Our Grand Mothers

By Sonsyrea Tate

Seems like a few women from my grandmother's generation came into my life to reinforce a few lessons I resisted. Wilhelmina Rolark was one of those women, angels commissioned by my grandmothers, I like to think. I met Mrs. Rolark only once in a brief introduction here in the offices she owned. I only remember a handshake, a polite nod from her, and relief that at least she hadn't frowned. Seems like a lot of the older women frown too often at younger free-wheeling women – creatures of their own making, I think.

Stay with me, I'm going somewhere.

Some of the basic life lessons I resisted at home, I would learn out in the world from women like Mrs. Rolark – and Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, whom I also worked for once.

A bit of a malcontent, at home I resisted using the proper flatware at the table. (Why must I digest the etiquette of our oppressors?) I resisted standing erect and straightening out my pigeon toes when I walked, too. It seemed so pretentious. But in Mrs. Norton's office, where I worked as a Congressional aide in charge of greeting letters, the lessons in etiquette were reinforced. I winced at my tasks - writing congratulation letters on the occasion of some child's sixth birthday or some Boy Scout's latest feat. I'd been an award-winning reporter by then and considered it quite trite to waste my God-given talent on such generic missives. Turns out, this was not only reinforcement of my grandmother's lessons in etiquette, but also training in gratitude and the dynamics of public relations. A little "thank you" goes a long way.

At home I resisted lessons in lady-like behavior, too. But later, during my first stint as an editor at *The Informer*, Grandma's lessons in good taste were reinforced. Word got back to me that Mrs. Rolark, a dear friend of C. Delores Tucker, who'd waged a campaign against misogynist lyrics in rap music and the industry's portrayal of Black women, was peeved when I put a photo of a bare-breasted Lil' Kim on the front of her family-friendly community newspaper. Turns out, she wasn't only reinforcing both my grandmothers' lessons in decency and good taste, I also was learning to put principles over profits. Exploiting a rap star's sexuality to attract new readers simply was unacceptable here. Some of our raunchiest, feistiest girls began by running and fighting for their lives, are still running and fighting for their lives and far-be-it from we, ourselves, to exploit such desperation.

With the recent deaths of C. Delores Tucker, Shirley Chisholm, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, and now Mrs. Rolark, who worked closely with Mrs. King to make Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a national holiday, the torch is being left to us. Oprah Winfrey picked up her baton a long time ago and ran away with it, blazing new trails.

Whether our grandmothers were dynamic trailblazers on the world stage or women of modest achievements – maintaining marriages till death did them part, raising productive children, or maintaining ordinary jobs—now's a good time to reflect on their legacies and the lessons they taught. Now's a good time to decide what we will fashion from the new freedoms they helped afford us. Even if they weren't on the picket lines protesting for women's rights to have our own careers, bank accounts, mortgages, and investment

portfolios - rights we now take for granted, thinking women have always had them - they maintained these new freedoms by exercising them.

I'm not suggesting we learn how to wash laundry by hand as some of them did. I'm suggesting we go forward in their spirit. They did what they had to to survive, to thrive, to fly. They were "grand" mothers to our mother's generation and ours. Now's the time to build on their legacies. Let's do it.