Benjamin L. Hooks New Chief Of The NAACP

By Mary R. Brown

Benjamin Lawson Hooks, at 52, is a man with several successful careers to his credit and if he returned to any one of them in private life could become a rich man. But he chooses now to become the ninth executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the oldest and most prestigious civil rights organization in the country.

While he will make a salary of $50,000, his tasks with the NAACP will be formidable. He takes this new responsibility because he wants to make this nation a better place in which black folks can live.

Poor 'Ol Country Preacher

For years Ben Hooks has described himself as just a "poor little 'ol country preacher." He said it when he spoke to juries, to hostile sheriffs during the civil rights years, and later to civic groups as their guest speaker. It served its purpose then to charm and soothe those he felt he wanted on his side.

It was never completely accurate, however, because it hides a scholarly intellect, an analytical mind and a driving determination to move his people forward. It does reflect Hooks' self-association with the "little man," the underdog and the down-trodden in society.

He has never lost the common touch and it's expected he probably never will.

The NAACP Needs Me

When Hooks takes over as head of the NAACP in August of this year, he brings to the job his experience as a Baptist minister, businessman, lawyer, judge, civil rights leader, moderator of television shows and member of the Federal Communications Commission.

In addition, he brings a strong religious belief and an eagerness to meet the demands of our time. When some black leaders recently expressed concern that Hooks should remain on the FCC in order to be appointed its next chairman, Hooks refused to stay on.

In an exclusive interview with DAWN, he said, "while the FCC offered continued challenges, the NAACP offered a wider field of public service and the job as executive director would not be open in 1979 when my FCC term ends." And, he added, "the NAACP needs me."

Commissioner Hooks told Crisis magazine, the official journal of the NAACP, "I believe now I have an opportunity to address some of the great issues and problems of the day affecting our nation and its minorities.

"I will do my best to see that government, at all levels, executive legislative, administrative and judicial, are responsive to the needs of all the people in such areas as unemployment, affirmative action, penal reform and overhaul of the criminal justice systems, excellence and quality in education, and so many other important areas.

"I am hopeful that the private sector will join in helping to meet some of these challenges."

It is a massive manifesto of what one man, with the help of others, hopes to achieve. It is, however, believable judging what Hooks has built from his youth in Tennessee and going by his past method of operation.

The Day the Lights Were Cut Off

Born Jan. 31, 1925, Ben Hooks was the fifth of seven children of the former Bessie White and professional photographer Robert B. Hooks of Memphis, Tennessee. Hooks grew

BENJAMIN L. HOOKS

up in what he has described as "a very rich and beautiful childhood."

It was affluent in the beginning because his father was a leading photographer of the time. When the Depression came, Hooks learned he and his family would have to make do with less. He said of the time, "I remember the day the lights were cut off, the day the mortgage was foreclosed."

He and his family survived those setbacks and it is from this period that he is said to have developed strengths that he draws on even today.

Drafted into the infantry from college in World War II, Hooks made it through three years he calls "terrible," emerging in 1946 as a staff sergeant. He entered DePaul University Law School in Chicago because he could not enter segregated schools in his home state.

He completed three years work in two and went back home to Memphis. There he began his now familiar step-by-step efforts to work up within the community a place of leadership. In 1965 he became the first black judge in Shelby County.

During this period he married a teacher, the former Frances Dancy. They have been married for twenty-six years. They also adopted Hooks' then twelve-year-old niece, now Mrs. Patricia Hooks Gray, after her parents were divorced.

Today Patricia is married to Carlos Gray Sr. and they are the parents of sons, Carlos and Carlton, all residing in Cincinnati.

Chester Higgins, Hooks' long-time press aide and friend, describes his boss as "a family man, a strong leader, a religious man and a voracious reader."

Hooks enjoys listening to religious music, bike riding with Mrs. Hooks and playing tennis. His stocky five foot seven inch frame is trimmer these days due to dieting.

Hooks is also a man who feels all things are possible with hard work. Those who have followed his career from the Memphis days expect major changes at the NAACP when Hooks takes over from "Mr. Civil Rights," Roy Wilkins.

To follow Wilkins will be no easy feat. How will he do it? Based on past observation, Hooks will first make a thorough study of the problems facing the NAACP. He will then work on those that can be immediately solved and set up a list of those that will take more effort.

He keeps pushing to bring public awareness up to the level of understanding on long-range projects. And he shows an uncanny ability to work on a problem at several levels. The system has always shown results.

Blacks Need To Buy Small Stations

When Hooks first joined the FCC, he had his critics. In the years that he has served as commissioner, he has been credited with upgrading national awareness of how broadcasting affects minorities. He recently convened a special two-day conference in Washington to discuss the discrimination by the investment community which

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'Poor little 'ol country preacher' makes move to meet challenges

'I leave you love.'

Mary McLeod Bethune wrote these words in the "legacy"—a credo for living and serving others—that she left to the National Council of Negro Women.

To Ella Wynn of IBM, they are particularly important words.

Last year, the NCNW had them inscribed on a plaque and presented to her in appreciation for her work.

Ella Wynn, on a year's paid leave from IBM, worked with the NCNW to help streamline the operation of its Women's Center for Education and Career Advancement in New York.

IBM also contributes funds to help the center in its work.

But it's Ella Wynn and dedicated people like her who are keeping alive Mary McLeod Bethune's "legacy" of helping others.

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