



Generations of Black female activists fight to protect voting

Deborah Barfield Berry USA TODAY

ATLANTA — Mary-Pat Hector headed one recent afternoon down the promenade that connects historically Black colleges here, stopping at a table draped with a bright blue tablecloth. “Rise” was emblazoned across the front.

The 26-year-old leader of the nonpartisan organization checked in with organizers who had spent hours urging students at Clark Atlanta University to register to vote.

“Excuse me, queen. Are you registered to vote?” one organizer asked a passerby.

Before she left, Hector had collected the 263 cards from students who pledged to vote and seven forms from students who’d registered. The stop was one of many in the organization’s effort to connect with thousands of students across the country.

“It always felt like this was something I just needed to do,” said Hector, whose passion to protect voting rights grew during the 2016 presidential election. “I knew that there was a sens — of urgency, that we were like beating down the clock — the same feeling that I feel right now.”

Hector is among a young generation of Black women working to register people to vote and cast their ballots Nov. 5. But she’s far from the first.

See ACTIVISTS, Page 4A



Mary-Pat Hector, the CEO of RISE, said her passion to protect voting rights grew during the 2016 presidential election. LYNSEY WEATHERSPOON/USA TODAY

TOP: Melanie Campbell serves as president of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. Generations of Black women, including Campbell, lobbied in 2020 for then-California Sen. Kamala Harris to become the first African American and South Asian female vice president.

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Activists

Continued from Page 1A

Like others, Melanie Campbell, a 61-year-old national voting rights advocate, has been doing this work for decades. Judy Richardson, an 80-year-old civil rights veteran, for even longer.

Black women like them have long played pivotal roles in national and local politics — from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter.

Tactics have changed. Voting barriers have changed. Even the dangerous environments where they do their work have changed. But their mission, they say, is the same across the generations.

“I want to help our people, and I believe you can’t do that without having an impact through the political system,” said Campbell, president of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation.

Democracy, she added, is “still something we have to fight to keep.”

Thoughts of freedom

One recent afternoon, Richardson sat next to other veteran activists in a classroom at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, sharing tactics they used in the 1960s to register Black Southerners.

Richardson and other veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee have been visiting historically Black colleges and civil rights museums hosting “toolkit” meetings where they share organizing tips, among other things.

“You have a responsibility to make this world better than it was when you came into it,” Richardson said. “I’m doing this at 80 because the other people around me are also 80 and are still doing it too. You could be sitting around knitting baby booties. And they may still be doing that, too, but the main thing is the folks that I know who are SNCC veterans never stopped.”

Over the years, Richardson, a documentary producer, has worked on projects focused on change, including the award-winning “Eyes on the Prize” documentary about the Civil Rights Movement. She recently finished a documentary for the Frederick Douglass National Historic site in Washington, D.C.

Richardson said she often tells young Black female activists that voting is important, but there must also be long-term organizing. She repeats lessons she learned from her own elders.

“I may never see the change that I’m working for, but if I do nothing, nothing changes and then my children and my children’s children have to go through the same stuff that I went through,” she said. “At some point, you got to say it will end here. Or at least I will do something that makes it easier for those who are coming behind me.”

‘Black women, they’ve been long in this work’

In recent years, record numbers of Black women have stepped up to run for elected offices, including for state governors and the U.S. Congress, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Today, there are several national and local civic engagement organizations led by Black women, including Campbell’s and Hector’s. Many were created



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in the last decade.

“Everyone is recognizing the sheer power of the leadership of Black women and women of color more broadly,” said Wendy Smooth, associate professor of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State University. “For Black women, they’ve been long in this work around political organizing and mobilizing voters, and we are now seeing a greater interest in actually running for office.”

Black women have been credited with helping candidates pull off upsets such as in 2017 when Doug Jones became the first Democrat in 25 years to win a U.S. Senate seat in Alabama. Black women also played a critical role in mobilizing voters in the 2020 presidential election and supporting the bid of Democrat Joe Biden.

Generations of Black women, including Campbell, lobbied in 2020 for then-California Sen. Kamala Harris to become the first African American and South Asian woman vice president. They also successfully pushed for the 2022 confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first Black woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.

“I do think now that we’ve turned the corner, people are used to seeing Black women,” Richardson said. “You see Black women in positions of power, who are really, really smart and really, really committed. That’s the norm now, and that’s a really good thing.”

‘Each generation has to fight’

As head of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, which among other things urges people to register to vote, Campbell spent months spearheading get-out-the-vote campaigns in communities across Georgia, Pennsylvania and Michigan.

She began her activism when she was a student at Clark Atlanta University in the 1980s. She also worked on

several political campaigns, including volunteering for the early congressional campaign of civil rights icon John Lewis. She would later work with Lewis on efforts to protect voting rights.

Campbell later moved to Washington, D.C., where she worked for the coalition and became its president and CEO.

She continues to press Congress to pass federal voting rights legislation named after Lewis. She was among a group of Black women arrested in 2021 on Capitol Hill for participating in a demonstration demanding the protection of voting rights.

“We’re going to always have to fight for it in some way. Historically, we couldn’t vote. Historically, we were enslaved,” said Campbell. “That’s the reality in this country because we never fully addressed and dealt with racism ... Part of how you suppress was the suppression of the vote. So it’s something that each generation has to fight for.”

Training the next generation

A day after her stop at Clark Atlanta University, Hector traveled nearly two hours to another university in Georgia to train students on how to get their peers more involved in voting and advocate for issues they care about.

For Hector, the work is personal. As a young Black woman, now seven months pregnant, she has fewer rights to her body than her mother had.

“That’s very, very sad,” she said. “So for me, this upcoming election means more than just voting in an election, but it really is life or death. I’m a woman who’s having a baby in the state like Georgia where more women die during childbirth in this state than almost any other state in the country. Like, that is real ... My life depends on it, my daughter’s life would depend on the outcome of this election.”

Hector became the CEO of RISE last

year. The 5-year-old youth-centered organization advocates for debt-free college options and youth political power. It’s active in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and has expanded into Arizona, Nevada and North Carolina since Hector took charge.

As a student at Spelman College, another historically Black school in Atlanta, she led organizing efforts with Black Youth Vote and later became Georgia’s Black Youth Vote coordinator.

During her sophomore year, she served on the Student Government Association, and along with Black Youth Vote and the Georgia Coalition for the People’s Agenda, the organizations registered 500 students.

The death of George Floyd and other unarmed Black people sparked youth activism that Hector aims to continue.

“How do we motivate them to utilize that passion and energy to also cast the ballot and vote in the upcoming election?” she asked.

Hector came up with “Black the Vote,” a program in Georgia to train Black students to become trusted messengers, talk to peers about voting and reach out via social media. The program also urges them to become election workers. It’s now part of a national multicultural effort called RISE University, which trains students at campuses across the country.

“With young voters, I think what makes them feel heard is talking to them about the issues that they care about the most,” Hector said.

Black women activists of older ages plan to continue mentoring the next generation.

“I’m going to do all I can in my dash and try to train others and lift up other young leadership,” said Campbell. “Because what’s important is to also have a continuum. We’re only going to be here for our finite time. The question we have to always ask ourselves is, ‘What are we doing in our dash?’”