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The Braille Monitor–March, 2001 Edition

# Black, Blind, and Successful: The Story of a Fighter

by Ever Lee Hairston



*Ever Lee Hairston*

**From the Editor:** Ever Lee Hairston is First Vice President of the NFB of New Jersey and a longtime Federation leader. She is also the supervisor and administrator of the Alcohol, Drug, and Outpatient Program for Camden County Health and Human Services of Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Following the Presidential Report on Wednesday afternoon, July 5, 2000, she came to the podium to address the convention of the National Federation of the Blind.

**Her audience, which had just raptly listened to President Maurer's stirring annual report of what the organization has been doing to change life for blind people everywhere, settled back and immediately found itself gripped by Ever Lee's story. It's impossible to capture the full fire and impact of her delivery on paper, but as nearly as possible this is what she said:**

On a warm September afternoon in 1995, the national Hairston clan was celebrating its twenty-second annual reunion in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Hundreds of family members drove south in a caravan of cars and buses to see the Cooleemee Plantation. Judge Peter Hairston guided visitors through the house and described the history of the plantation. One of the leaders of the Hairston clan gathered as many people as he could in the dining room after Judge Peter had described the history, and the leader thanked the judge for taking them through the rooms and describing the history. To an outsider it seemed an awkward moment--African Americans standing in a mansion their enslaved forbearers had helped build and hearing the history of the plantation from the white owner. But the leader went on to explain that it was important to hear the history and to visit the plantation because he said, "Our blood is in this soil."

I was born on this plantation, the third of seven children, raised by my parents and paternal grandparents, who were share croppers on the plantation. I walked three miles to a segregated school until the third grade, after which I was bused nineteen miles from home for grades four through twelve, passing some white schools along the way and using their hand-me-down books. In spite of having to rise so early for the bus, I really enjoyed school but detested having to stay out usually two consecutive weeks at a time in the fall and in the spring to pick cotton.

I remember one fall day when my two older siblings and I had been taken to the place where the hundreds of acres of cotton were planted. We were picking cotton that afternoon. We had gotten about fifty yards down the cotton row, and I leaned forward to pick this beautiful cotton out of the cotton boll. Lying on the ground was a long, black snake. I was frightened, but my brother convinced me that we must continue with our task for the day. I kept on picking. I had gone another twenty yards down the cotton row, and when I leaned forward to pick this beautiful cotton from the cotton bowl, I looked down on the ground. There was a brown snake. I looked around, and there were another and another.

Those of you who picked cotton know that I am telling you the way it is. We all ran as fast as we could until we reached a trailer parked at the beginning of the cotton row packed with several bags of cotton. I was so frightened I climbed

into a bag on the very top, and I sat and thought, "There must be a better way of life for me."

Immediately after high school I went to New York to work as a live-in maid. I was responsible for the care of an eight-year-old girl with a terminal illness. At the end of the summer she passed away. The family assisted me financially in returning to North Carolina to pursue a career in nursing. Unfortunately, I did not become a candidate when I failed the eye exam because of the early stages of retinitis pigmentosa. So I enrolled in North Carolina's Central University, Duram, North Carolina, and was invited to stay with an aunt and uncle who lived near the campus. While in college I became involved in the civil rights movement of the sixties. I joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a sit-in demonstration protesting Sears, Roebuck and Company's refusal to hire blacks.

I recall an evening during one of our protest marches when some whites were throwing rocks, stones, eggs, and all kinds of debris. Despite the turmoil, we continued undaunted to march and sing:

*We shall overcome,*

*We shall overcome,*

*We shall overcome some day.*

*Deep in our hearts,*

*We do believe*

*We shall overcome some day.*

We continued to sing and march, and when we reached the parking lot of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, we all sat down. Buses pulled up. It seemed as though they were going to run over us. People began to scream. The police moved in and ordered us to leave. Refusing the order, we remained steadfast in our sitting position. And at that time we started singing again:

Over my head, I see freedom in the air.

Over my head, I see freedom in the air.

Over my head, I see freedom in the air.

There must be a God somewhere.

At that point the police moved in closer, began to pick us up, throw us on the buses, and haul us to jail. We continued to sing. We were shouting--no violence--but we continued to sing. We were told that the jail keeper had had a heart attack and died.

I was deeply concerned that this entire experience would bring embarrassment and repercussions for my family. My greatest fear was that my aunt and uncle would pack me up and send me back to the plantation. None of my family members were supportive of my involvement in the movement.

After college I moved to New Jersey to begin my teaching career. I had earned my degree the old-fashioned way--determination and hard work, working my way through to pay the tuition. I began my teaching career. A short four years later my eye sight rapidly deteriorated, and I was forced to resign. I was devastated, felt sorry for myself, ran from job to job. You see, I didn't look blind. I felt insecure, and, believe it or not, I was in denial about my impending blindness.

Finally in 1983 I felt as if I was still sitting on top of that bag of cotton. I knew there had to be a better way of life for me, and I must press on. I applied for a position with the Camden Department of Health and Human Services. All that they could offer me was an entry-level position, counselor trainee. When I was being interviewed by the director, I was challenged by his negative attitude towards blindness. He tried to discourage me by saying that I would need to observe the clients' body language visually in order to get the job. I countered by saying, "Auditory clues can be just as effective. For example," I said, "You just crossed your legs." I had no blindness skills; I was faking my way through.

I received a call in 1987 from Judy Sanders and Jackie Billey inviting me to an NFB convention in Phoenix, Arizona. I made excuses. I was a single parent. I didn't know what would happen to my job if I left for a week. So I said, "Let's compromise."

Jackie Billey said, "Come for four days at least." I took the plane. I arrived in Phoenix, Arizona, at the hotel, and all I could hear was canes tapping--dogs licking my legs, and I just didn't know what I was going to do. Someone invited me to the buffet. I went through the buffet line sticking my fingers in the mashed potatoes and using the gravy as a finger bowl. I had no blindness skills. Going through the registration line I was asked, "Would you like a Braille or print agenda?" I could no longer read print, and I certainly didn't know Braille. A light bulb went off for me. I thought, "I am illiterate."

I talked to as many people as I could at that convention in Phoenix, Arizona. I learned of the NFB centers. From then to 1990 I continued to fake my way through, but I knew that there was hope. I called the Louisiana Center for the Blind in Ruston, Louisiana, and spoke to Joanne Wilson. I didn't know that I was calling her home, of course, at 6:00 a.m. I didn't care. I needed help. When Joanne answered the phone, she said, "Come down."

I did. I attended the Louisiana Center for the Blind in 1990 and 1991. I returned to New Jersey now with my blindness skills--Braille, computer, cane travel--returning to New Jersey anxious to integrate these skills into both my professional and personal lives. I continued to move up the ladder on my job, taking the civil service exam, being met with a lot of resistance along the way. You see, when I went there as counselor/trainee, no one thought that I would ever make it through the year. Now I could see myself moving up past them because now I had become senior counselor.

I have to tell you one of the things that helped to do it and to build my confidence. While attending the center, I thought they were crazy when they told me I had to go to New Orleans to Mardi Gras. While the students and staff were attending Mardi Gras, we were taken to the parade. We were told that we would be split up into teams, so there I was with three other students. We were plowing through the crowds of people with our long white canes in hand, and some of the people wanted to pray for us. Some laughed and joked and made fun of us. One man even asked, "Are you going fishing?" The one that took the cake for me was the man who said, "Three blind mice, see how they run. Three blind mice, see how they run." But you know, what was important about that was, having participated in the civil rights movement, I knew that it was important for me to focus on the task rather than the people.

I moved back to New Jersey after the New Orleans experience with confidence I had never had before. In 1991 two other blind people and I organized the Garden State Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey. I continued to move up the ladder on my job, becoming supervisor in the department. I am responsible for supervising eight case managers and four clerical staff personnel. Some people were there when I began who never thought that I would make it, and now I am their supervisor. However, I continued to be challenged by them because some of them still feel that they are not going to be supervised by a black, blind, female person. However, with the confidence I have today, and believing in myself, I have no problem writing them up for insubordination. Incidentally, before I came here to Atlanta this week, I had to do just that. One person was suspended. I said, "Great, I don't have to worry about his causing problems while I am away."

Some of my responsibilities include conducting daily staff meetings, where I have to supervise case managers--reviewing their cases and assigning tasks. I report to the director of the Department of Health and Human Services at the county and state level. I also conduct workshops in which I train and teach alcohol and drug education to indigent clients of Camden County--people who have an addiction to alcohol or other drugs--a population that is very difficult,

but it touches every one of us here on the job, in our homes, or in our lives in one way or another. I do believe that addiction is a disease and that those people deserve an opportunity to change as we do.

I travel independently and work in the courtroom every week as an advocate for these people. I believe it is more economical and cost-effective for us to give them rehabilitation rather than jail them. I am also responsible for representing the agency in meetings throughout the state. Some things that I am very proud of in addition: I have traveled to northern Africa and to southern Europe. I have climbed the Dunn's river falls in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. I have climbed Sassafras Mountain in South Carolina. In 1999 I was elected the Employee of the Year for Camden County for my leadership as a supervisor. In 1999 I was also named Woman of the Year for my leadership in the community by the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Incorporated, of which I am a founder. Also in 1999 I was on national TV, "Sixty Minutes Two," where they were featuring a book written about my family, *Hairstons, an American Family in Black and White*. Just before coming to this convention another great challenge led by Vito DeSantis and John Reef, the challenge course, forty feet in the air on the ropes.

Change, ladies and gentlemen: that's what it's all about. "C" is for courage, taking a risk and making a commitment. "H" is for honesty. I had to learn, "To thine own self be true." "A" is for assertiveness. Be direct. "N." It was necessary for me to make some changes along the way. "G" is for God for me, my choice, my higher power. "E" is for excitement. We must smile and enjoy what we do in the Federation. None of us can achieve success entirely on our own. But with God; the encouragement and support of family and friends; and the most powerful organization in the world for the blind, the National Federation of the Blind, we can effect change. Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is a process. Working together is success.

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