

PAUL HARRIS RECOGNITION - Gloria White Gardner - December 22, 2016 – by Bob Scolnik

I know today is our annual Holiday Luncheon and there are many guests today who may not know about Paul Harris, a Chicago lawyer who started Rotary International with three business associates in 1905 and the significance of becoming a Paul Harris Fellow. Every year, the Muskegon Rotary Club presents one or two Paul Harris Fellow recognitions as a way of expressing its appreciation for an individual's substantial contribution to humanitarian and educational causes. And usually, when these awards are presented, they are done so that the name of the recipient is not revealed until the end of nomination remarks, but today that won't be the case. I will tell you the name and I'd like to talk about why this honor is so deserved and why it is being presented today. Please hold your applause until the end of my remarks. Also, I'd like you to know that today's honoree will soon be moving to the Washington, DC area to be closer to her daughter and she is leaving in just 3 weeks, so it was important to honor her now. Today we are honoring former Muskegon Rotarian Gloria White Gardner. Gloria has been a community leader for many years representing Women and the African-American community in almost every part of life in the Muskegon Community. She has been a wonderful friend to both me and my wife Merle and I'd like to tell you a little about Gloria, her life and her impact on Muskegon.

Before I begin I'd also like to tell you that I'm going to use a word that you'll find uncomfortable and even offensive, but Gloria used the words in her conversations with me over the year and I asked if I could and she said it was just part of history. Please don't take offense.

Gloria was born in Magnolia, Arkansas and moved to Muskegon in 1942 when she was only 2 years old. Her father, Jerry Wesley White, Jr., moved to Muskegon because he had received information that there was no "Colored" dry cleaner serving Muskegon and the white owned dry cleaners were reluctant to serve this part of the population. He opened Super Service Dry Cleaners on Fairfield Street in Muskegon and operated this business for many years. Gloria attended Muskegon Heights Public Schools, graduating from Heights High School in 1958. She was a very good student and passed the pre-nursing exam, but at that time Hackley School of Nursing told her that they had their two "Colored" students for the year and she could reapply in 1959. An Uncle from Chicago learned of her problem and took her to his home and she applied to Chicago Nursing Schools and was accepted by the Michael Reese School of Nursing. She excelled and graduated as a Registered Nurse and because of her excellent record, could work in any ward, and not just in the Colored wards. Her first job was at the Cook County Hospital Emergency Room and, while the work was difficult, she became a valuable member of the staff.

While on a day off with 5 other nurses in downtown Chicago, they met a Navy Nurse who encouraged them to consider joining the Navy. Gloria applied and eventually spent 3 years in the Navy. She worked at Bethesda Naval Hospital as a Neuro Psychiatric Nurse and after her release, she stayed in the Washington, DC area. She worked in Washington for 38 years, retiring in 1990 from the Department of the Interior. Aging parents brought her back to Muskegon in 1990 and at that time, there was a need for a new Executive Director of the Muskegon Urban League. She applied and was named Executive Director from 1990 through 2000. She made many contacts during those years and lists her major mentors as Helen Larsen, Rabbi Alan Alpert and Neil Rosen, the former owner and producer of Cherry County Playhouse. It was during those years that I first met Gloria and we worked together on one of her programs. Gloria had to build a diminished Urban League, starting programs, recruiting members and supporters. She credits Rotarians John McGarry, Nancy Brozek, Mary Ann Gorman and Nancy McCarthy as important allies and advisors. While at the Urban League, she started the NULITES organization (National Urban League Incentives to Excel and Succeed). She ultimately recruited 35-40 girls, 9th through 12th graders and they were required to work on community service projects and maintain a minimum of a 2.8 GPA. Over those years, she took a large group of girls on college visits to HBCU schools (Historic Black Colleges & Universities) plus schools such as Michigan State and the University of Michigan. She was able to raise the money for these bus tours over these years. Almost every one of these students did well, going on to college and many keep in touch with "Miss Gloria" on a regular basis. I've seen it when we've been out for dinner and someone will come over to greet Gloria...many times being a former NULITE student. She also wrote successful grants to the Department of Justice for 5 years of "Weed & Seed" funds, receiving \$500,000 per year for 5 years for Muskegon and Muskegon Heights. The idea was to eliminate the criminal element by seeding with program initiatives by collaborating with police departments. Under her programs the Drug Free School Zones were created as were the police patrolling on bicycles.

Gloria has been very active in other areas of the Muskegon Community. She's served on United Way's Allocation & Review Committee, the West Shore Symphony Board, the YMCA Board, as a Founding Board Member of the Dispute Resolution Center, as an active volunteer with the Frauenthal Theater and the new Boys & Girls Club of the Muskegon Lakeshore as one of the Founding Board Members. Her association with the Catholic Church is an important part of her life and she is a Grand Lady of the Knights of the St. Peter Klavern. She was appointed by Governor Snyder to serve on the Michigan Humanities Council where she has been extremely active. She also was part of the recent, hugely successful Inspire Campaign for the Muskegon Museum of Art.

Her impact has been tremendous...as President of the Black Women's Political Caucus, on the Board of the NAACP and as a voice in many, many organizations. Gloria White Gardner was the first Black Female in the Muskegon Rotary Club and was a member of our Club for 13 years.

Please help me by congratulating Gloria White Gardner as the World's newest Paul Harris Fellow.