

*The Lift Every Voice series spotlights the individual voices in our alliance who guide us to wrestle with entrenched inequities and structural racism as we all learn, listen and develop strategies for change.*



“ My mother was born in 1922, and my dad was born in 1919. They worked really hard to overcome many hardships. I know my mom and dad would have gotten an education if they had been allowed. **My dad had a 6th grade education, but he was a mathematics genius. My dad was smart, but he never had an opportunity to go to school.** He made sure all his children were educated, and that we had everything we needed. He was a line worker at Tip Top's Bakery (Flowers Baking Co.). He walked to work every day. He knew the business inside and out; but, he was never promoted to foreman.

I had brilliant parents. They were never able to prove it from an educational standpoint, but they did from a life and wisdom standpoint. ”

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Elma Hairston is a successful businesswoman and one of the most active, get it done, volunteers in our community. Among her volunteer roles (too many to list), she is serving as President of the High Point NAACP. She was one of the first Black cheerleaders at Ragsdale High School but was denied a spot in the Homecoming Court – despite being elected – because of her race.

And yet, many of her memories of school and teachers are positive and illustrate the difference public education makes in individual lives and in our community. Hairston also reflects on her positive experiences in the '60s and early '70s with integration, and the negative consequences of the resegregation she has experienced since returning to North Carolina after a successful corporate career in Colorado.

## What are your hopes for the future? For our community?

My hope for the future of our community is for everybody to participate in the booming economy that is about to happen. We must provide our children a technological education that makes them ready to compete in a global economy. We must make sure that we have a legislature that truly values education, rather than just talks about it. They need to show us that they value education by putting back the money that they took away from the Education Lottery. It does not make sense to allow jobs to escape us because we have not educated our people to be able to retain those jobs.

## When did you first become aware of the concept of race?

I have lived in and worked in markets all over the country, but I never felt racism the way I felt racism when I moved back to North Carolina. It is deeply ingrained in the culture. We are going to keep on working, it is not all gloom and doom. We are going to keep on working, and we are going to keep on achieving. We are going to keep on moving up. These mindsets must change because you cannot have some of your society rising, yet others do not. We must rise together. Black people have been deprived of a lot of what they should have had. When you try to deny one race, you deny the whole human race.

## Tell me about growing up. Going to school. I know you went to Ragsdale and then to GTCC.

I finished my undergraduate degree at Xavier University in Cincinnati Ohio, which is a Jesuit school. Small classes, lots of attention, loved it. I hold a Bachelor's degree in Organizational Management from Regis University in Denver, Colorado. I finished my Master of Arts in Integrated Marketing Communication at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York. My mom used to work for Dr. Fortney and Mayor Ragsdale in Jamestown. Mr. Ragsdale was the first person that loaned my dad the money to buy a car because they wouldn't loan Black people money back then.

## Tell me about your education growing up.

I built great relationships with many of my teachers at Ragsdale. They're the reason that I am where I am today. These were mostly white teachers that told me that I could succeed, that I could do anything I wanted to do. My mother and father told me the same thing. One of my teachers told me that I was elected to homecoming court in the 10th grade, but they did not give it to me because no other Black girl sat on homecoming court. At the time, we did not know that was racism. We did not know what that word was. As I got older, I now know that is what that was, but that was the mindset of people in that day. I felt very rejected at that time, but my mother said, "Don't let anything stand in the way of your dreams. You can do anything you put your mind to." "A setback is a setup for your next success." Lastly, many Black students at Ragsdale who had great talent was not encouraged to attend four-year colleges but to attend two-year institutions, while most white students were encouraged to attend four-year colleges. It is my hope that today we harness the talent of all students and point them in the direction of success.