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BEYOND DASHIKIS & BEADS: CHECKING OUT THE HOMELAND

RACING FOR TIRE SAFETY

THE NEGRO IN WORLD HISTORY: JAMES FORTEN

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THE COVER: The new president of the National Education Association, Mrs. Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, not only speaks for a brighter future for the one million teachers she represents, but also is the strong-voiced advocate for millions of children whose educational needs must be paramount in any consideration of school matters.

The Voice of the Teacher Speaks for the Child

by Ernest Tidyman

Her name is Elizabeth Duncan Koontz. She heads the largest organization of teachers in the country. And her lesson plan requires an improved educational system.

The school bells won't ring tomorrow morning . . . somewhere. Your town? My town? Possibly both. The playground banter? It will be succeeded by the picket line rancor. The ordered process of study and learning? It will be supplanted by the disorderly procedure of counterclaims and disagreement.

What we will have is one of the 300 to 400 teachers' strikes expected to take place in this country during the current school year. What it will mean, in the strong words of Mrs. Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, is that more teachers have been confronted with the educational truth that:

"We cannot continue to look these children in the eye and live with ourselves."

Elizabeth Koontz speaks for one million teachers when she identifies the massive social estrangement within public education as a flight from guilt toward a confrontation with its causes. She is this year's president of the National Education Association, the first Negro to lead the largest professional organization of teachers in the country.

She also speaks for the millions of children whose demands and needs for an educational preparation are said by all sides in the school disputes to be at the crux of the difficulties. At 49, she has been involved in education all her life as the daughter of an educator, a teacher herself for almost 3 decades and one who plans to return to face the eyes of her own pupils in Salisbury, N.C., when her year as president of N.E.A. is over.

Mrs. Koontz, an extremely attractive woman, whose clear strong features are framed by a mass of curls and lighted by a disarming smile, rose to the presidency of the professional association through the ranks—working on a variety of councils, committees, panels and study groups until her investiture in the top office in Dallas earlier this year.

In choosing Mrs. Koontz, who has a "tell it like it is" reputation earned by her forthright statements about the educational crisis in this country, the teachers and school administrators seemed to be saying that their professional association needed a stronger voice, a clearer voice, a more aggressive voice in negotiating their work agreements with school systems throughout the country. The N.E.A. had long borne the label "conservative," at least in comparison to the strong tactics used by rival representative groups such as the United Federation of Teachers, which-called the bitter school strike in New York City this year.

As spokesman for the N.E.A. and its most prominent voice in establishing future policies, Mrs. Koontz is expected to eliminate that mark of conservatism as well as the estrangement between educators and their school systems. Neither, standing alone, would be an easy assignment for Mrs. Koontz; neither can be avoided.

"But education is so far behind," she says of a program that has risen in spending 250 per cent since 1963, that will rise $3.9 billion to a total of $58.5 billion by 1969, but will still include:

- Places where there is just no room for another child to sit and learn, while others have empty classrooms—and resist busing.
- Salary levels so low (mostly in the South) that teachers very nearly qualify for assistance under state poverty programs.
- Legislatures so dominated by rural representation that they cannot recognize (nor appropriate funds to alleviate) the jammed shambles called schools in the urban areas, particularly the ghetto.

"And we are going to have to pay later for this," says Mrs. Koontz, whose husband is a high school teacher and athletics instructor in Salisbury. "Just as we are paying now for what was *not* done before. We are going to pay in penal institutions, mental institutions or for protective systems simply because there is no way out."

Certainly these are not unrecognized problems. In a crisis-oriented society, the school crisis has stood out plainly since the "war baby" boom of World War II inundated classrooms a few years later and also since rising black participation voiced demands first for integrated, upgraded educational facilities and then for community-controlled and upgraded classes.

But the teacher's role in doing anything about this seemingly chronic crisis has been merely a character part, a walk-on walk-off bit, in a drama of great social change. The educator's air of militancy, the angry voice of demand is new. Why?

"For a long time there was a feeling we could depend on the communities to support education," Mrs. Koontz says. "There was not the advanced psychology of political power in existence then, not so obvious a disparity in the matter of respect for the teacher as an educator, not the rise in the cost of living that emphasized the gap between the skilled and the unskilled."

The position teachers found themselves in may also be described as . . . a trap: The teacher was regarded as that quiet, studious nonentity who spent many years and many dollars achieving a superior education and a mastery of a highly technical skill and then placed it all at the disposal of a board of education, a group of citizens who were regarded as qualified to set educational policies because they were successful as grocers, insurance salesmen, clothiers, bankers, lawyers and, in some cases, mothers and fathers.

The teachers were expected to remain quiet nonentities about curricula, their salaries (the national average is now only $7,500), decaying buildings (one of the largest high schools in New York, on Staten Island, is old enough to have been once visited by Abraham Lincoln, still has no playground or sports area and the attendance bell is rung each morning by one of the cleaning women), the psychological problems of the children in their classes (leading to a practice of passing troubled pupils just to get rid of them).

Quiet . . . respectful . . . unnoticed . . . while the rest of the country went through a technological, social and economic period of giant strides forward. This is why the teachers are now increasingly militant, this is why Mrs. Koontz is leading a broad attack on the ills of the educational system.

"It is a tremendous task and we feel we must combine our efforts to speak for the children and for the teachers," she declares. "We have to speak so the essentials can receive the attention they must. And what we object to is reorganization going on in the educational system through outside influences."

And, according to the president of the N.E.A., this means:

1. The teacher must be accorded the professional status equal to his training, skill and standing among other professionals.

2. The teacher must be given a voice in school policy and standards, equal to his training and expertise.

3. There must be a continuing effort to obtain better-trained teachers, to compete with the industries luring them away to serve their own educational programs.

4. The teacher must become a political activist to bring about a greater financial participation by federal, state and local governments

(Continued)

in the development of teaching as a profession and the facilities in which it is practiced.

Libby Koontz, as friends and close associates call this attractive woman, came to the responsibility of leading such a complex and difficult effort over a long but direct route. She was born June 3, 1919, the youngest of seven children who faced the challenge and the benefit of being part of a highly talented family.

With both a father and mother who were teachers—her father headed Atkinson College—the youngsters were expected to aspire and achieve and were instilled with the spirit that would bring the effort from them. Libby, her five brothers and sister, all worked their way through college and went on to professional standing, most in education.

It was also an environment couched in human as well as intellectual terms. Her father would do some of the family shopping on his way home, probably puzzling over such a large grocery bill, even for a family of this size. He might, as men will, even comment upon it as he came through the front door with the packages, but there would be no comment from Libby and her brothers and sister as they went out the back door with some of those packages later in the day—delivering them under instructions from their mother to less fortunate families in the community.

For Libby, the route to adult achievement from this background of human and intellectual values was graduation from Price High School and then Livingstone College, both in Salisbury, and a degree from Atlanta University in Atlanta, Ga. She did additional graduate work at Columbia University, then Indiana University and, having settled on special education as her field, continued studies at North Carolina Teachers College.

Her capacity to lead was quick to emerge—and quick to get her fired from her first teaching job in Dunn, N.C., where she discovered that the principal of the school was overcharging staff members for board at a school-owned boarding house. She organized the teachers into a revolt against the system that seemed to be little more than peonage. It was obviously not an irremedial mark against her professional status; she was soon ensconced in new schools, learning more and leading more.

For the last 10 years, Mrs. Koontz has been teaching special education classes at Price High School in Salisbury while she has continued her professional activities through the ranks of the N.E.A., its Council for Exceptional Children, the National Association for Retarded Children and the President's National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children.

To the outsider, the children of her classes in North Carolina are labeled "retarded," perhaps because they are slower than the average youngster in achievement, possibly because it is easier to label than to understand them. To her, the youngsters lack perception and skills on an equal basis because they have been neglected and their potential not developed on an equal basis.

There is, she believes and makes clear, a strong parallel between these children who bear the label "retarded" and the ghetto children, who are imprisoned by economic and social disadvantages.

"To learn," she says, "the child without stimulus must be provided with ideas and must be provided with evidence that there is a possibility of achievement and that there is a realizable goal. There has to be enthusiasm."

But what of this can be felt, she asks, for the child in the crowded, filthy horrors of the slums?

"Think of the child in the economic prison," she suggests, "in the family where there is no conversation to learn from, where there is no money to provide the simple experiences that are beyond a two- or three-block area. It costs money to go to the zoo, to see things, to find the life experience that inspires thought."

Thus, while she campaigns vigorously for the N.E.A.-backed $6-billion aid to education bill introduced to Congress this year (providing $100 for each child and a full 50 per cent teacher salary supplement), Mrs. Koontz finds herself confronted with the fact that it should be doubled, trebled, quadrupled—anything, to save the children.

"Education has become such a piecemeal problem," she says. "If the legislatures will not ameliorate it, who's to raise Cain? If the communities will not act, who will? If the Congress will not provide the funds, who will? If the public will not accept the responsibility of its children, who will?"

In short, who will speak for the child?

The teacher. Libby Koontz. Somewhere . . . today . . . the teacher will be speaking for the child. ■