

Hilda Mason biography

Hilda Mason was a long-time civil rights activist who was elected to the D.C. Board of Education from 1972-77 and the D.C. City Council from 1977-98 on the Statehood Party ticket.

Hilda Howland M. Mason was born June 14, 1916, in a log cabin that her father had built near Altavista, Va. She was initially named Hilda May Minnis, but the family added the name Howland to honor a wealthy New England suffragist, Isabel Howland, who helped establish schools to educate black girls in the South.

She attended Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg and St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville before moving to Washington in 1945.

Hoping to become a teacher, she attended classes during the day at Miner Teachers College while working the graveyard shift at the Bureau of Engraving. She received her undergraduate degree from Miner in 1952.

She received a master's degree in education at D.C. Teachers College in 1957 and did further graduate work at the State University of New York in Plattsburgh and at Catholic University.

She was a teacher, counselor and administrator in the D.C. public school system for 19 years, until she was elected to the Board of Education from Ward 4.

She met her husband Charles during civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s and the two were almost always together, with Charles sitting in the front row during board of education and council meetings.

Mason was a political pioneer being elected as an open socialist during a period when the word was widely vilified and her interracial marriage also stood out during that time.

Mason was a tireless campaigner for statehood for the District of Columbia.

As a council member, she turned a sympathetic ear to the concerns of poor and disadvantaged residents.

She worked for better schools and housing and preserved bus routes that were useful to the elderly.

She backed measures for gun control, rent control, tenant and consumer rights, home rule and District statehood. She opposed the death penalty.

In 1982, she supported a ballot initiative banning nuclear weapons in the city, a natural outgrowth, she said, of her work on civil rights.

She was instrumental in the creation of the University of the District of Columbia in the 1970s and what became the David A. Clarke School of Law in the 1980s. The school's law library is named for Mason and her husband, Charles N. Mason.