A Dreamer and Her Dream Lose Ground

THE SUNDAY PROFILE

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When Johnnie Tillmon-Blackston joined the welfare rolls in Watts three decades ago, the pendulum of reform was swinging in favor of an impoverished group of single mothers who viewed welfare as an entitlement and resented government's prying eye.

Back then, in the early 1960s, welfare officials routinely conducted midnight raids on homes, searching for evidence that a man lived in the house or looking for proof that a recipient was secretly living a life outside of poverty.

CAROLYN COLE / Los Angeles Times

"We are going backward, not forward," says Johnnie Tillmon-Blackston of the welfare rights she fought so hard for in the '60s and '70s.

Tillmon-Blackston, a single parent raising six children on public assistance, put together a group of welfare mothers in the Nickerson Gardens housing project to fight the practice. That led her to help organize and become the first chairman of the National Welfare Rights Organization, a movement of thousands of mostly female welfare recipients that eventually stretched coast to coast.

Historians would come to regard that movement as a pivotal influence in the institutionalization of welfare, setting federal standards that forced states to improve the lives of poor people. The message the mothers took to city after city was: "Welfare is a right, not a privilege." Government, they argued, had an obligation to help those in need.

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Today, the National Welfare Rights Organization no longer exists, and Tillmon-Blackston, 69, and raising nine grandchildren, is watching her dream of welfare as an entitlement for the poor die.

"We are going backward, not forward," she says in her home just a few blocks from Nickerson Gardens, shaking her head.

Like her dream, she is fading too. She has been in and out of hospitals. Diabetes has taken a foot. She no longer ventures out to the blues clubs she loves. Most of what she has left are memories, scenes from a cause that was once as central to the civil rights movement as integrating a lunch counter.

"Sometimes I still miss the streets," she says. "I loved demonstrations, I loved protest. I'd be out right now if I could."

Instead she watches a public debate that has shifted 180 degrees from her day, a debate in which the most persuasive voices argue that welfare enslaves people rather than rescues them. A bill passed earlier this year by the House of Representatives would turn back the clock on many of the hard-fought battles welfare activists like Tillmon-Blackston won during the nation's War on Poverty.

Today's reformers would reduce federal authority, freeze allotments, limit time on assistance to five years and drop whole categories of recipients, such as teen-age mothers and legal immigrants.

Today's arguments that welfare encourages unemployment and out-of-wedlock pregnancy irritate Tillmon-Blackston no end. The notion that anybody would *want* to stay on welfare remains unfathomable to her.

"What if you don't have a job after five years? What then?" she snaps. "People need education, they need job opportunities and not just some $4.25-an-hour job at McDonald's that you can't raise a family on.

"Having babies for profit is a lie that only men could make up. Welfare doesn't have nothing to do with sex. Babies don't have anything to do with welfare. It may have something to do with hunger. If you're hungry and you have a little sex, for a minute you might forget that you're hungry."

Tillmon-Blackston went on welfare in 1963. She'd left her husband in Arkansas and was struggling to make a life here, working in a Compton laundry, when she became ill. She began to worry that her children were growing up without proper supervision. So instead of returning to work, she sought public assistance.

She encountered a system that she felt was dehumanizing, requiring recipients to jump through too many hoops. Why, for example, should anyone have to explain how they'd managed to afford to have a television set in the house? Why should welfare eligibility inspectors look through anybody's refrigerator?

She'd already been an activist—a union shop steward in the laundry. She knew how to organize. She sent anonymous letters to all residents in Nickerson Gardens, calling a meeting for welfare recipients. Three hundred women showed up.

They looked in a dictionary for a name they could call themselves that would symbolize their bitterness at a system that treated them like faceless people. They found it in the A's: *Anonymous.* The welfare program in those days was called ANC—"Aid to Needy Children." ANC-Mothers Anonymous was born. Eventually the women joined a statewide group, and Tillmon-Blackston was sent to the first national convention of welfare recipients in 1966.

Los Angeles Times

Johnnie Tillmon-Blackston cuddles her grandchild as she and George Wiley, left, discuss welfare with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

Johnnie Tillmon-Blackston

Age: 69.

Native: No. Born in Scott, Ark., she moved to Los Angeles in 1963.

Family: Having raised six children as a single parent, she is now raising nine of her grandchildren with her husband, blues musician Harvey (Harmonica Fats) Blackston, in a house a few blocks from Nickerson Gardens.

Passions: Fighting for welfare rights; going to blues clubs.

On the golden age of the civil rights movement: "Sometimes I still miss the streets. I loved demonstrations, I loved protest. I'd be out right now if I could."

On welfare, babies and hunger: "Having babies for profit is a lie that only men could make up. Welfare doesn't have nothing to do with sex. Babies don't have anything to do with welfare. It may have something to do with hunger. If you're hungry and you have a little sex, for a minute you might forget that you're hungry."

It was a time when poor African Americans like the mothers in Nickerson Gardens were better equipped to fight back because their demands were closely linked to the civil rights movement. Through public demonstrations and lawsuits they changed the nature of welfare in the 1960s.

The numbers of recipients ballooned nationally as state eligibility rules were standardized and recipients used newly won rights to challenge welfare administrators' rulings.

From its beginnings in 1967, the National Welfare Rights Organization rapidly gained respect for its audacious proclamation that there was no stigma to being on the public dole. "The Ladies," as Tillmon-Blackston and her colleagues would come to be called, were among the few women to have key positions in the civil rights movement. Brought together largely through the efforts of George Wiley, a Rhode Island chemist-turned-activist who became the organization's first executive director, they were among the first to decry the feminization of poverty—a consequence of poor child care, lower wages and Great Society policies that shifted billions of dollars to improve benefits for the elderly.

In speeches to largely female welfare recipients arguing for a guaranteed income, Tillmon-Blackston frequently compared welfare bureaucrats to the man in a sexist marriage.

"The man, the welfare system, controls your money," she would say. "He tells you what to buy, what not to buy, where to buy it, and how much things cost. The man can break into your house any time he wants and poke around in your things. You've got no rights to protest. You've got no right to privacy when you go on welfare."

An itinerant sharecropper's daughter from Scott, Ark., who lacked a high school diploma, Tillmon-Blackston was both combative and politically astute, an ideal combination for an organization attempting to reshape the image of welfare mothers. Like many of the women she tried to organize, she was divorced.

From the start she set out to correct the misperception of welfare mothers as predominantly black. While the organization's membership was primarily black, she actively sought white members, who then as now made up the majority of people on welfare rolls. When a group of members dressed in African garb for a news conference, she urged them to change. Shortly before his death in 1968, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. sought the welfare rights organization's support as he shifted his own movement from Southern integration battles to more complex and less politically popular issues of economic discrimination.

King's request for an endorsement was sent to a National Welfare Rights Organization convention in Chicago. Tillmon-Blackston sent word back that the group would support him only if he flew there himself and addressed the group.

"It was a matter of respect," she says, not just for the organization but for the women on welfare.

At the convention, according to several people who participated, King seemed unprepared for a string of technical questions asked by Tillmon-Blackston and others about pending federal welfare legislation.

King's lieutenants—people like Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young, who would become national civil rights figures in the wake of King's assassination—tried to bail him out, recalls Tim Sampson, 60, now a professor of social work at San Francisco State University. One of King's aides suggested that the women consider civil disobedience, provoking a welfare mother to complain that she had grown tired of seeing men send women to jail on behalf of the cause.

"The temperature in the room was decidedly chilly," Sampson says. Finally, Tillmon-Blackston leaned over to King and said, "You know, Dr. King, if you don't know, you should say you don't know."

"You could see a light bulb flash" in King's expression, Sampson says. "He sat up straight, looked at her and said, 'Mrs. Tillmon, we don't know about welfare and we have come to learn.' That was a turning point."

By the 1970s, however, the movement hit a wall. The American political climate grew more conservative and recessionary pressures eliminated many cost-of-living increases in welfare benefits. The welfare rights organization's dream of a guaranteed income—in those days they sought $5,500 a year—never had a chance. President Richard Nixon supported the concept, but his proposal funded only $1,600, an amount the activists rejected. The bill never won congressional approval.

In 1972, Tillmon-Blackston, who had traveled to scores of cities and foreign countries despite being a welfare recipient, moved to Washington to become executive director of the financially strapped organization after Wiley stepped down. Now she had a paying job. She finally went off welfare.

By 1974, however, the organization had closed down due to lack of funds, and Tillmon-Blackston returned to Los Angeles, where she continued to work with the local chapter. She became an aide to then-City Councilman Robert Farrell, working on welfare rights issues.

She later served on a welfare advisory committee under Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown and then changed parties to keep a similar post in Republican Gov. George Deukmejian's Administration. She is still a member of the county's welfare advisory committee.

She purchased a small house, where she lives with her husband, Harvey (Harmonica Fats) Blackston, a blues musician, and nine grandchildren. Two of her six children, she explains, have economic and drug problems and are unable to take care of their children, and she was not willing to see the grandchildren go into foster care.

Like many of the mothers who organized the movement, she is now a great-grandmother as well. Ailments nag her. She had open-heart surgery in 1989, is confined to a wheelchair because of the amputation of her left foot and undergoes kidney dialysis three times a week. Her home number is still listed with welfare rights groups; the phone still rings with questions from desperate women. She is troubled by this younger generation of welfare recipients, the unskilled, unwed mothers, women with far more obstacles than she faced and, she suspects, less grit.

For all the talk of cuts, Tillmon-Blackston insists that she is confident the welfare system will not undergo radical change.

"I had this dream," she explains, "that everybody would send their checks back, uncashed. What happens then? Who is going to pay rent, gas, electric? What's going to happen in the stores when no one shows up with food stamps to buy groceries? If they cut off welfare tomorrow, what happens to all those county employees? They are on welfare too."

She lives across the street from the railroad track, not far from where her journey began when she went on welfare. Every so often a train comes rumbling down, shaking the house, rallying the children to look out the windows.

"When I was young in Arkansas, I used to live by the railroad track," she says. "The train whistling sounded so sad and lonely way over there in the middle of the night. I remember wondering where the people on the train were going, thinking that someday I would go somewhere. I felt that one day I was going to do that. So happens I did."

In her house there is little evidence of the life that Tillmon-Blackston lived. No pictures hanging on the wall of her sitting next to King or hobnobbing with politicians. Nothing of her riding in a mule-drawn wagon, an honored member of the Poor People's Campaign that followed King's death.

"I miss the people I used to come in contact with, the people and places I used to go. Things have changed, a lot of us have died, passed away. We fought a good fight while we were fighting.

"When I think of my life, I think of someone who really cared, who wanted to change things in America for the poor. An outspoken person who could raise hell if needed and a person who could be meek and humble if needed to be."

One recent afternoon, her grandchildren were venturing back from school. One of them, a 17-year-old girl, walked into the house, changed a baby sister's diaper, checked the mail and found a letter inviting her to join a tour of historically black colleges. Seeing this, Tillmon-Blackston called her over.

"I want you to go into medical research," the grandmother says. "Find a cure for diabetes. I may not be here when it happens, but they say the dead know what the living is doing. I would know."

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