

Willie Stevenson Glanton



The focus of Willie Stevenson Glanton's life has been social change, the human condition, civil liberties, and political activism. She was born in Hot Springs, Arkansas to parents who were the primary source of her political drive and development. Her father organized the Negro Civic League in Hot Springs. Her mother taught elementary school. Ms. Glanton's first recollection of participating in a political campaign was a family effort that involved defeating the local poll tax referendum. Her traditional father wanted her to be a teacher like her mother. But by age 11, Ms. Glanton knew that she wanted to be a lawyer and "free up people."

Early influences were her eighth and ninth grade teachers, who were instrumental in developing her vision of who she wanted to be and what she wanted to achieve and in developing her interest in English and the discipline of speaking and writing well. She ultimately graduated from Tennessee A & I University in Nashville with a bachelor's degree in business education. Through the insistence of her advisor, Ms. Glanton prepared to take a national government exam, which led her to Washington, D.C. There, she earned her law degree from the Robert H. Terrell Law School and took a position with the U.S. War Department. Although she did not intend to stay long, Ms. Glanton spent seven years having a "great time getting to know Washington." She met national leaders such as Mary Church Terrell and Mary McCleod Bethune, both of whom would serve as models of personal and public conduct as she matured into womanhood.

Ms. Glanton also met her husband while in Washington. Upon marrying in 1951, they moved to Des Moines, Iowa, and her political life began in earnest. Her first priority was to begin her career as an attorney. In 1953, she became the second African American woman to be admitted to the Iowa Bar; the first was admitted in 1918. Because of discrimination, it was difficult to find office space in downtown Des Moines, but by 1955 she had established a law office nearby. A year later she became the first African American woman to become an assistant county attorney in Polk County.

Ms. Glanton also joined the League of Women Voters and became active in numerous Democratic political groups, which served as the organizational foundation for her political and social activities and the arena in which she legitimized herself as an activist and party insider. She quickly gained a reputation as a hard worker,

contributed to campaigns, was seen regularly at Democratic organization meetings, and performed critical precinct tasks.

In 1962, Ms. Glanton and her husband were sent by the U.S. State Department to Africa and southeast Asia, where she studied laws and their application to women in these countries. Two years later, back in Iowa, Ms. Glanton was one of 11 Democrats elected to represent the state Democratic Party against the Republicans in the November election. Of the total number of votes cast for the 11 newly-elected legislators, she received the second highest, trailing the leader by only 20 votes. It was her first attempt at elected office, and she became the first African American woman to be elected to the Iowa General Assembly. When sworn in the following year, she became one of two African Americans in the Iowa House. While in the legislature she continued her commitment to "freeing up people" and worked on fair housing issues.

Ms. Glanton resigned from the state legislature in 1966 to take a staff position as a lawyer with the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), the first African American attorney in the Iowa office. She continued her commitment to civil and human rights and focused renewed energy on women's rights. Ms. Glanton remained with the SBA until she retired 21 years later.

In 2004, Des Moines University established the Glanton Scholarship to honor Ms. Glanton and her husband, "a husband and wife who rose to the pinnacle of the legal profession at a time when most black Americans were struggling to gain basic civil rights." She continues to reside in Des Moines and remains active in various civic and religious organizations. Among Ms. Glanton's many honors and awards is her selection by the *Des Moines Register* as one of the 10 "most influential black Iowans of the 20th century."