



Remembering Bessie

THE NEWARK CAMPUS REDEDICATES HILL HALL IN HER HONOR

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hen Rutgers–Newark Provost Steven J. Diner came to campus in 1998, he assumed Hill Hall was named for its location atop the Warren Street hill. “Over time I learned that the building was named for someone who is very special to the history of this campus,” said Diner, speaking at rededication ceremonies last October for the eight-story classroom and office building.

The building was named to honor Bessie Nelms Hill when it opened its doors in 1971. Hill, who became the first African American to serve on the Rutgers Board of Governors (BOG) in 1965, worked as an English teacher and guidance counselor in Trenton. One of her students, David Dinkins, went on to become mayor of New York City in 1990. She died at the age of 83 in 1981.

At the rededication ceremonies, President Richard L. McCormick talked about how Hill helped steer both the Newark campus and the university through years of racial turmoil. Vivian Sanks-King (NCAS’70), vice president and general counsel of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, reminisced about Hill’s role in the Conklin Hall takeover in 1969.

King recalled that “Bessie informally invited us to her apartment in the Colonnade to discuss our demands, and we showed up with a list—and a lot of attitude. She had this enormous presence and she soon had us sitting respectfully on the floor around her.

She then took out that famous red pen of hers and went to work. She told us that if we were going to submit such an important document to the BOG, it had to not only be clear, but also pass muster in the grammar department.”

This portrait, by Bernard Jackson, along with a plaque acknowledging Hill’s contributions to education and civil rights, is on permanent display in Hill Hall.