



**THE MODEL AND MIRROR OF BRENDA MARSH MITCHELL:  
BRINGING HELP, HOPE AND GOOD TO OUR COMMUNITY**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**S**URELY, IT IS THE SACRED TEACHING OF our honored ancestor, Nana Fannie Lou Hamer, that “there are two things we all should care about: never to forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over”. Here I raise and praise the name, work, indeed, the wonderful good of Nana Brenda Marsh Mitchell, born and coming into being April 13, 1947, and passing, making transition and ascension, August 3, 2014. And I raise and praise her and the wonderful good she brought in the world as a model and mirror for us all, a model to emulate and a mirror by which we can measure ourselves. She is a model and mirror as leader, activist, institution-builder, confidant and friend, counsellor, community advocate and above all, a faithful and effective servant of her people, our people, Black people, African people.

And as she repeatedly told us in personal, communal and public conversations, presentations and interviews her guiding principle was to do good for her people and others by not only giving them help but also hope. For she knew that hope is the hinge on which striving for a better and beautiful life turns, an indispensable source of aspiration and self-assertion in the world. Indeed, as she knew, it is fundamental to the concept and condition of well-being itself.

As we give Nana Brenda the effusive and appropriate praise she deserves and is due, let us remember she is firmly rooted in a tradition of great, honored and beloved Black women who preceded, accompanied and made her and us all possible. We speak of the great women of history and the history books like Nanas Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Mary Church

Terrell, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, et al. And we speak of her mother and foremothers and ours who did not appear in the history books but are as real, relevant and irradicably rooted in this tradition, and make it daily present and a living practice.

Thus, Nana Brenda tells us that in working with other women, older and wiser in the way the world works, she gained valuable knowledge and relationships of support, cooperation and struggle. In her conversations and interviews, she mentioned with praise and honor women leaders like Nanas Johnnie Tillmon Blackston, Welfare Rights Organization; Nana Mary Henry, Avalon Carver Community Center; Nana Gwen Green, NAACP, SCLC; and Nana Lillian Mobly, King/Drew Hospital. She emphasizes her over 35 years of work with Nana Lillian not only at King/Drew, and serving seniors, children and the homeless et al, but also in the organization that brought these great and beloved women together as one, Mothers in Action. She says of Nana Lillian, “She was my guiding light. She turned the corner for me. She taught me ‘in God’s time’, not yo’ time’. And I tried to do everything I do with that in mind”.

Thus, she emerged as an organic leader, that is to say, came into being as a leader naturally within her community, by the work she did, the thoughtfulness in feeling and reflection which she demonstrated, the help and hope she gave others, and the respect and love she gained in this process and practice. This organic leadership and faithful and effective service to the people is expressed in her every morning prayer. Thus, she tells us that “Every morning when I wake up, the first thing I say is ‘Lord, let me help change the

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quality of somebody's life and make it better for somebody' ". And deeply rooted also in the Black religious and ethical tradition, she embraced its moral stress on doing good for and giving hope to the most vulnerable, the least among us, the downtrodden, the harmed and hurting, the poor and oppressed. And Nana Brenda tells us in her UCLA oral history how she worked with the ill and aged, the homeless, victims of domestic violence, the drug addicted, the welfare family, victims of police violence, prisoners, struggling workers and the unemployed. And she did it as a moral commitment rooted in her own faith tradition and the ethical teachings of her mentors and role models.

When we talk about what she and we see as the best years of her life, work, struggle and striving we are compelled to speak, as she did so often, about her coming to work, learn and eventually lead in her own right at the Brotherhood Crusade and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, led by her most important mentor, supporter and friend, Danny Bakewell, Sr., former CEO of the Brotherhood Crusade, executive publisher of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and CEO of Bakewell Media and Bakewell Company. Complimenting Nana Brenda in an equally laudatory manner, he states that Nana "Brenda was at the core of everything at the Sentinel and Taste of Soul".

It is he, whom she refers to alternately as Danny and Mr. Bakewell, depending upon the situation and the point to be made, who taught her vital lessons of life, work, struggle and rightful relations with our people, building on the knowledge, skills and experience she brought. It is, she tells us, he who mentored and taught her, gave her the conditions and cultivated the capacities she needed to serve our people the way she wanted to. And thus she became, not only an employee, but also a co-worker, co-builder and co-

combatant in the struggle, and eventually, a highly valued confidant and friend of the highest order.

Recalling the earliest lessons taught and learned well, Nana Brenda says that Danny was a great and gracious teacher, a mentor who aspired towards the best and highest level and urged his employees and associates to imagine and do likewise and no less. She says, "I was taught by Professor Danny Bakewell Sr. He taught me how to respect my community and how with every breath you take to help someone to do better in our community". She talked about loving to go out among the masses of our people, talking and working with them, laughing and breaking bread with them, whether in working with Rev. Jesse Jackson's historic presidential campaign, or lead organizing and doing work for Mothers in Action or Taste of Soul, an awesome food and family festival, a signature achievement of her and Danny's collaborative and cooperative work.

Conscious of the critical needs and future role of young people, Nana Brenda, working within the context of Mothers in Action and with the support of the Brotherhood Crusade, organized an ongoing "Back to School Health and Family Festival". Here they raise resources and secure sponsorships for health screening, immunization, school supplies, hair cuts and hugs, and inspiration and advice to young people to strive for excellence in all they do. She said of the centrality and serious meaning of this work, "There is no service we provide to our community more important than making sure our young people have all the necessary tools and equipment they will need to secure a quality education".

She saw this initiative as a key effort in building and strengthening family and community as well as expanding the possibilities

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of the future. And she advised them to have a steadfast commitment to community, a productive patience, hard work and setting aside illusions of the quick, the easy and inevitable. She says to them and us, “For the younger generation, I want to say ‘take your time. You got to do the work. You have to stay here and do the work. You can’t have freedom on an Instagram’ ”. It is a lesson and legacy even for her children and grandchildren. For as her daughter, Tracy Mitchell Williams, now president of Mothers in Action, states “She gave me a work ethic and the meaning of being committed to your community, as a way of life and not a job”, in a word, a natural, needed, and never ending way of bringing good in the world.

**N**ANA BRENDA MARSH MITCHELL WAS/IS indeed an extraordinary, ordinary, everyday person, an organic leader who brought to the table and task an impressive literature of life, work, service and struggle to draw from; a rich, varied, instructive experience to extract from invaluable lessons learned in daily reflection and practice; and an unbreakable will to make wide ways out of small ways and new ways out of no way to give help and hope and enduring good for our people. May we all honor her legacy by living it as best we can, emulating her model and measuring ourselves by the comparative good we do and share in our community and the world.▲

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Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, *The Message and Meaning of Kwanzaa: Bringing Good Into the World* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, [www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org](http://www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org); [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).