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“IF THE SITUATION SEEMED INSURMOUNTABLE, I ALWAYS WANTED TO BE THERE”: VIRGINIA COFFEY, A MIDWEST HUMAN RELATIONS PIONEER

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At first glance the American Midwest would not seem a likely place to find pioneering work in the field of human relations. Home to many rural and small-town residents of northern European heritage such as Norwegians, Swedes, Dutch, and Germans, the Midwestern states are not fraught with ethnic conflict.² Native Americans, although sovereign in their own right, most often use settled law to broker tribal relationships with federal, state, and local entities.³

There are, however, Midwestern states with large African American populations in their metro areas. The Great Migration of the twentieth century brought waves of black migrants to cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, and other industrial cities in the heartland.⁴ The impact

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² Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013). See especially footnotes on page 88.

³ Christine K. Gray, *The Struggle for Native American Sovereignty* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2013).

⁴ Chad Berry, “Twentieth Century Southern Migration,” in *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*, Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher, and Andrew Clayton, eds., (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 242-245.

of that migration is reflected in the significant proportions of black residents in many Midwestern cities today: Detroit (83%); Flint (57%); Chicago (33%); Columbus (28%); Indianapolis (27%); and Lansing (23%).⁵

These urban areas were typical in terms of their race relations. Where Jim Crow laws did not prevail, widespread prejudice did.⁶ Race relations were especially tense during World War II as black troops and defense workers experienced constant discrimination despite their service to their country. Black leaders expressed their dissatisfaction by embracing a "Double V" policy, victory over Fascism both abroad and at home.⁷ Writing in 1951 the director of the NYU Center for Human Relations Studies, Dan W. Dodson, noted:

It was clear that the war had forced a showdown on the second-class citizenship status of Negro citizens. It was also clear that in addition to the national aspect of the issue, it was also a community problem. Another revelation was the fact that municipal governments were woefully unprepared and inexperienced either to understand the problem or to deal with it. These conditions led to a new instrumentality of municipal government, namely, a commission in the office of the mayor composed of leading citizens charged with the responsibility of doing what they could to promote better intergroup relations within the community.⁸

In 1896 the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision upholding "separate but equal" segregation in public facilities set the tone for race relations in much of the country, especially in the American South. In the North, however, a nascent Civil Rights Movement which had begun in the nineteenth century continued to grow in the twentieth with the founding of the NAACP in 1909 and what would eventually become known as the National Urban League in 1911. Although

⁵ Sonya Rastogi, Tallese D. Johnson, Elizabeth M. Hoeffel and Malcolm P. Drewers, Jr., "The Black Population: 2010," accessed at <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-06.pdf> (Note: These data are for Black Only). The Hispanic and Asian populations in the Midwest, while growing, are relatively much smaller. See Douglas Massey, ed., *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).

⁶ Josephine Mazzuca, "U.S. Race Relations by Region: The Midwest," accessed at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/7279/us-race-relations-region-midwest.aspx>; Sarah Stankorb, "No Land Is Innocent," *GOOD*, January 18, 2015, <http://magazine.good.is/features/midwest-racism-cincinnati-cleveland-ferguson>; William Nelson, "Race Riots," in *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*, 1244-1246 (see note #4).

⁷ Lee Finkle, "The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric: Black Protest During World War II," *Journal of American History*, vol. 60, no. 3 (Dec. 1973), 692-713; Harvard Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War," *Journal of American History* vol. 58, no. 3 (Dec. 1971), 661-681.

⁸ Dan W. Dodson, "Public Intergroup Relations Agencies," *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1951), 398.

the background of municipal human relations agencies is in part rooted in that movement, their development became significant after the 1943 Detroit race riot that left thirty-four people dead, hundreds injured, and portions of the city devastated. This event in particular launched a pattern of establishing official human relations groups across the country. Some of the earliest of these agencies could be found in the urban Midwest: the Chicago Mayor's Committee on Race Relations,⁹ the Detroit Mayor's Interracial Committee, and the St. Louis Race Relations Commission were each founded in 1943. The Cleveland Community Relations Board would follow in 1945, and the Minneapolis Mayor's Fair Employment Practices Commission, established in 1947, would evolve into the city's Commission on Civil Rights. Similar agencies were created throughout the 1950s and 1960s in smaller Midwestern cities.¹⁰

Founded in 1943 in Cincinnati, the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee (MFRC) is illustrative of Midwestern intergroup relations agencies during this era. The MFRC spent its early years hiring an executive director, opening an office at city hall, and negotiating a line in the city's budget. Tolerance and respect for differences were promoted over bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination. The committee's work involved education, persuasion, and persistent effort — a form of gradualism that did not involve protest, resistance, or public demonstrations. Thus the MFRC was designed from the outset to be a subtle behind-the-scenes actor, an advisory body with no enforcement powers. In addition to promoting racial peace and wartime cooperation, the MFRC was committed to a pluralistic vision of society in which all race and culture (if not class) groups were considered of equal value. Nevertheless, its attention was almost entirely focused on race relations by the late 1940s.

In 1946, for example, four black men stopped a white couple and purportedly raped the woman while holding the man at gunpoint. Anger flared among white Cincinnatians, some of whom armed themselves, and mass meetings were called for. The MFRC tried to head off the specter of vigilantism and open violence by contacting religious and civic leaders to advise "common sense and moderation." The tense situation was eventually defused by the interventions of both black

⁹ Following the 1919 Chicago race riots, Illinois Governor Frank Lowden established the Chicago Commission on Race Relations in 1921. This was a privately-funded investigative body that disbanded after issuing its report, "The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Riot."

¹⁰ Kenneth L. Saunders and Hyo Eun Bang, "A Historical Perspective on U.S. Human Rights Commissions," paper prepared for the Executive Session on Human Rights Commissions and Criminal Justice, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, June 2007, http://www.hks.harvard.edu/index.php/content/download/67468/1242682/version/1/file/history_of_hrc.pdf.

and white leaders. The MFRC subsequently conducted a study indicating the local press and radio had added fuel to the racial fires by their “injurious and even hysterical” reporting on the crime. Executive Director of the MFRC Marshall Bragdon and a board member met with *Cincinnati Enquirer* editor Robert Ferger and *Cincinnati Times-Star* editor Hulbert Taft, eliciting assurances that apparent racial conflicts would be reported with more restraint in the future.¹¹

Within five years of its founding, Marshall Bragdon ensured that the MFRC would continue to be a force for racial equality by hiring Virginia Coffey to be the MFRC’s assistant director. Although a white director working with a black assistant director was typical for mid-century human relations agencies, hiring a woman for the position, however experienced and capable, was not.¹² At MFRC Virginia Coffey would expand her already growing record in human relations.

Virginia Keys Jones was born in Wheeling, West Virginia, but raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from the age of four, graduating from South High School in 1922. After completing the two-year curriculum in physical education at Western State Normal School (now Western Michigan University), she took a teaching position in Cincinnati’s all-black Harriet Beecher Stowe School. The nineteen-year-old grew up knowing few racial restrictions:

I grew up in a small Michigan city where we were one of three Negro families on our block. Our other neighbors were Irish Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Assyrians, and white Protestants of various denominations. The children were all great friends, attaching little importance to race or faith until a childish argument led to some name calling but children’s anger cools as rapidly as it rises.¹³

In Cincinnati, however, she discovered she had to “learn her place”:

¹¹ Marshall Bragdon, [1965], “MFRC 1943– 965: Story of the Mayor’s Friendly Relations Committee of Cincinnati, Ohio. A Pioneer Intergroup Relations Agency,” mimeo, Box 2, Judge S. Arthur Spiegel Papers, Archives and Rare Books Library, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter Spiegel Papers). A bracketed date, e.g., [1965], indicates the document is not formally dated, but internal evidence argues for the date shown.

¹² Burton Levy, “The Bureaucracy of Race: Enforcement of Civil Rights Laws and Its Impact on People, Process, and Organization,” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 2, no.1 (1971), 77-105.

¹³ Virginia Coffey, “Children Learn Faith From Chums In [sic] Block,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 27, 1968, 5. [Note that page numbers given for *Cincinnati Enquirer* articles are those associated with their digital scans for the newspaper’s online archive, not the pagination of the physical issue. Digital scans of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* used in this article accessed at <https://www.newspapers.com>. Some archived newspaper clippings referenced in this article did not provide page numbers.]

It was very humiliating to be singled out as a second-class citizen...Jobs for blacks were scarce. Most parks were closed to blacks. Fun places, such as Coney Island, were off limits. Entering most restaurants and theaters downtown was also taboo. Blacks lived primarily in one neighborhood, with other blacks.¹⁴

She joined the local NAACP in an effort to change racial conditions in Cincinnati. Participating in direct actions opposing discrimination, she was pelted with debris and had molasses poured on her hair during a protest at the entrance to Coney Island. On another occasion she and others were verbally abused while trying to buy tickets to a whites-only theater. Her reflection on these early efforts to achieve equality was typically straightforward: "It was worthwhile and justifiable, because we are American citizens."¹⁵

While at the Stowe School (1924-1926) she learned the value of presenting positive role models to students from the school's founder and principal Jennie D. Porter, a stratagem she would later apply in her human relations work.¹⁶ She also learned the school had no gym or dedicated space for physical education classes. Believing it would be a better match for her skills, she moved to another institution serving black children in the city's West End, the YWCA. She served the "Y" for fifteen years, first as the Girl Reserve secretary (1926-1931) and then as executive secretary of the West End branch (1932-1941).¹⁷

The YWCA's Girl Reserve aimed to help girls of different races and ethnicities develop well-balanced personalities, grow physically, and advance in social responsibility.¹⁸ Mirroring the Girl Scouts, by the early 1920s the Girl Reserves had a handbook, uniforms, and badges of achievement. As Girl Reserve secretary, Virginia Jones showed an early interest in promoting better human relations by establishing a Girl Reserve Club at Holy Trinity Church in the West End. In her

¹⁴ "Virginia Coffey", unattributed newspaper item dated January 16, 1988, in clipping file, Virginia Coffey Papers, 1935-1984, Cincinnati History Library and Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter cited as Coffey Papers).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Biographical Data," Box 1, Coffey Papers; "Harriet Beecher Stowe School" description posted by the Cincinnati History Library and Archives, <http://library.cincymuseum.org/aag/history/stoweschool.html>.

¹⁷ Interview of Virginia Coffey by Stephanie Corsbie, Cincinnati History Library and Archives, Cincinnati Women Working Audio Collection, Mss AT, Interview 4, [1980] (hereafter cited as Cincinnati Women Audio Collection); "Virginia Coffey," biography posted by the Cincinnati History Library and Archives, accessed online at <http://library.cincymuseum.org/aag/bio/coffey.html>.

¹⁸ See, for example, Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906 – 1946* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

words, “This is the first Catholic Girl Reserve Club in the city and certainly means a step forward in breaking down religious prejudices.”¹⁹

This pattern continued after she became executive secretary. At one point she was asked to investigate reports of racial tensions in a Girl Reserve Club in suburban Loveland, Ohio, well outside the city limits of Cincinnati. She found the girls getting along without rancor, but traced the misgivings to some of their parents. “After a discussion with the entire club, each girl promised to go home and interpret the Girl Reserve program to her parents,” she reported. “It is hoped then that all difficulties will be resolved.”²⁰

Jones learned important administrative skills during her fifteen years at the YWCA. As was the practice at the time, she ended her reports with a section headed “Numerical” or “Summary,” in which she presented quantitative data backing up the qualitative reports she submitted. Virginia Jones would continue to rely on fact-based decisions and evaluations throughout her career. In addition, upon becoming executive secretary of her branch she began upgrading job descriptions and consolidating responsibilities among her staff. Apparently based on prior experience, Jones was aware of the importance of a clear administrative structure for the success of an organization.²¹

After marrying William A. Coffey in 1941, Virginia Coffey took a sabbatical from her professional career, but was by no means idle. First working as a volunteer, she later became a religious educator and youth worker at Carmel Presbyterian Church (1943-1945) where she started the first black Girl Scout troop in Cincinnati.²² This troop soon became a model for others, and Coffey was hired to become the Girl Scouts’ first black field director (1945-1948). This provided her another opportunity to work for social change:

I was supervising the black leaders and the black Girl Scouts, and as I say, there had been no black Girl Scouts before so no programs were integrated. I set up a committee and we decided we were going to change all of this. We set up a five-year plan ... in less than five years the whole program was integrated.²³

¹⁹ Virginia K. Jones, “Girl Reserve Secretary’s Report, February 1930,” Box 36, YWCA Records, Cincinnati History Library and Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter cited as YWCA Records).

²⁰ Virginia K. Jones, “Annual Report -1936,” Box 37, YWCA Records.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Virginia Coffey interview manuscript, Cincinnati History Library and Archives, Adeline Harris Collection, interview 10, 1980 (hereafter cited as Harris Collection).

²³ *Ibid.*

This was not an easy accomplishment, however, eliciting opposition from parents and Girl Scout officials alike. A big event in the scouting year was the annual summer outing at a local amusement park, Coney Island, involving travel from downtown to the park on the riverboat, *Island Queen*, both of which barred blacks. Scouting officials came to Coffey and asked her to take her 100 or so black Girl Scouts to a city park while some 1,000 white scouts went to Coney Island aboard the *Island Queen*. Coffey responded: "I have nothing to do with the numbers. You make a decision about what your program is. If your program is for all girls in Cincinnati, then you decide which programs you want to continue and which ones you need to change."²⁴ The trip to Coney Island was permanently cancelled, and Cincinnati's Girl Scouts began holding a single outing for girls of both races in an integrated public park.²⁵ Coffey's efforts apparently did not abate, because in 1949 the Girl Scouts of Cincinnati announced it would allow all girls "regardless of race" to attend its summer camp in Fosters, Ohio.²⁶ Years later Coffey reflected on these experiences:

Admittance of blacks to public places of amusement, like skating rinks or Coney Island (the city's pride and joy) were closed to us. Nor could we ride on the "Island Queen," the big excursion boat that took you up to Coney, thus enabling you to spend a glorious day getting to and from the park. But, before we could change that policy the boat burned down. The city was covered with sadness at the death of their dear "Island Queen," but we blacks laughed; we didn't miss it.²⁷

MFRC director Bragdon heard of Coffey's pioneering work in scouting and walked across Ninth Street to the Girl Scout office facing city hall to ask if she would be interested in becoming the assistant director of the MFRC. Coffey remembered: "I was very intrigued at that time, because all along we were breaking down barriers and creating fellowship and friendship among people of all races and of all faiths. This was a major motivation and it impressed me that a city agency had such objectives. So, I went."²⁸ These two Midwesterners (he was raised in Saint Paul, Minnesota,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Rollercoasters: The Struggle Over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

²⁶ "Girl Scouts Camp Open to All Races," *Cincinnati Post*, June 23, 1949.

²⁷ Virginia Coffey, "Civil Rights and Intergroup Relations Institutions in Cincinnati," Black History Lectures, Cincinnati Historical Society, January 19, 1987, Box 11, US-15-01, Cincinnati Human Relations Commission Records, Archives and Rare Books Library, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter cited as CHRC Records).

²⁸ Coffey interview, Harris Collection.

she in Grand Rapids, Michigan) would work well together in Cincinnati where the MFRC's approach to race relations combined moderation with determination.²⁹

Upon arriving at the MFRC in 1948 Coffey set about writing a column titled "Speaking Out on Race Relations" for local newspapers, and speaking on human relations topics before civic and religious groups, social clubs, business organizations, and PTAs.³⁰ One notable invitation came in 1952 from the Urban League/Brough Community Association in her hometown of Grand Rapids. Subsequent to her keynote speech Mayor Paul Goebel appointed a Human Relations Study Committee, which resulted in the establishment of the Grand Rapids Human Relations Commission in 1955.³¹ Eleven years later Eugene Sparrow would move from his position as acting director of the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission to that of executive director of the Grand Rapids Human Relations Commission.³²

In addition to many public venues, Virginia Coffey often used her Walnut Hills home to promote racial understanding. In one instance sixteen delegates from the 1950 World Youth Assembly visited Cincinnati where African members of the delegation experienced discrimination firsthand. Coffey invited the delegation to her home where the delegates posed some difficult questions about racism in America to a gathering of black residents she had also invited. "Bad things do happen here," the delegates were told, "but more and more white Americans are helping us to fight and right these wrongs."³³ Coffey and Bragdon went on to leverage this experience by repeating the visitors' hard questions to local audiences, providing listeners the opportunity to, in the words of the poet Robert Burns, "see ourselves as others see us."

²⁹ Bragdon was a native Minnesotan who attended Mechanics Arts High School in St. Paul. See "Marshall Bragdon Papers, 1923-1981," Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, <http://amistadresearchcenter.tulane.edu/archon/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=215&q=&rootcontentid=83226>.

³⁰ The *Cincinnati Enquirer* archival search engine returned 1,676 hits on "Virginia Coffey" for that newspaper alone, most of them announcements of meeting participation, panel presentations, or talks given by Coffey between 1948 and 1963.

³¹ "Cincinnati Woman Official To Talk to Urban League," *Grand Rapids Press*, August 26, 1952; See also "About The Community Relations Commission" posted on the City of Grand Rapids website, <http://grcity.us/administrative-services/diversity-and-inclusion/Documents/Community%20Relations%20Commission/CRC%20REPORT%202012.pdf>

³² "Sparrow, Leaving Sees Race Progress," *Cincinnati Enquirer* August 15, 1966, 31. Both the MFRC and the GRHRC would experience organizational crises and undergo parallel reorganizations in the 1960s, the former becoming the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission and the latter becoming the Grand Rapids Community Relations Commission.

³³ Bragdon, "MFRC 1943-1965," Spiegel Papers.

The prestigious Cincinnati Woman's Club (WCC) began considering the admission of black members as early as 1915 but did not do so for more than three decades. The all-white club had an active Race Relations Committee beginning in 1927 and in the 1940s founded Fellowship House, an integrated organization aimed at promoting interracial and ecumenical cooperation. Virginia Coffey was an active participant in programs at Fellowship House and was among the first black women admitted to full membership in the Woman's City Club.³⁴ In 1961 she would be the featured speaker on race relations at a luncheon hosted by the WCC.³⁵

Her background in teaching and youth work often took her into the public schools. Mindful of her days at Stowe School, Coffey decided to, as Marshall Bragdon noted, "raise the sights" of black students by recounting "Negro success stories." She visited schools across the city on this mission, at the same time working with assistant school superintendent Wendell Pierce to identify and encourage black classroom teachers to seek promotion to administrative posts such as principal, thereby becoming role models for higher achievement in education.³⁶

Coffey's repertoire of success stories grew to include those of an X-ray technician, a city engineer, a beautician, a fireman, and an architect, to name a few. Under Coffey's aegis, Bloom Junior High students put on a play posing student actors as prospective dropouts who were encouraged to stay in school by other black students portraying adults who had stayed in school and "made it." At the play's end the real-life counterparts of the "successful adults" in the play walked on stage and told their stories. In Bragdon's words, "Their presence and remarks were a hit, making 'opportunity' seem a bit more than a word."³⁷

Those who knew her describe Coffey as "genuine" and "friendly" but with deep convictions underlying her cordiality; her integrity and profound moral engagement earned the respect of colleagues and critics alike. Coffey was willing to negotiate, but as one colleague noted, "She's a good one to have on your side of the conference table."³⁸

While at the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee, for instance, Coffey became involved in ending the system of designating days as "blacks only" and "whites only" at public swimming pools.

³⁴ Andrea Tuttle Kornbluh, *Lighting the Way...The Woman's City Club of Cincinnati 1915-1965* (Cincinnati: Woman's City Club, 1986); See also Andrea Tuttle Kornbluh, "Woman's City Club: A Pioneer in Race Relations," *Queen City Heritage* (Summer 1986).

³⁵ "Woman's City Club To Hear Virginia Coffey," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 16, 1961, 72.

³⁶ Bragdon, "MFRC 1943- 1965," Spiegel Papers.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Margaret Josten, "No-Nonsense Beliefs Mark CHRC Chief," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, January 5, 1968, 1.

The mayor had sent a group of white protesters, who were demanding the “separate but equal” policy be maintained, to the MFRC. Coffey’s account of the incident is worth quoting in full:

They burst into the office loud and furious, demanding to see the director. The secretary told them Mr. Bragdon was out but the assistant director was in, and perhaps she could help them ... When they saw me they came to a screeching halt. Having heard all their commotion when they came in, I rose from my desk, most courteously led them to our large conference table, seated them and then asked if I could help them. The angry leader, puffing furiously on her cigarette, blurted out their complaint, repeating over and over, “We’re taxpayers and we demand that those colored people be kept out of our pool on our day.” The others joined in, agreeing with their leader.

I sat there quietly and let everyone in the group fuss and cuss, and vent their anger. Then, when they finally finished, I said: “You say you are homeowners and taxpayers? Well you know, my husband and I are property owners too. It’s interesting – when we go down to the courthouse to pay our taxes, the man in the collector’s window doesn’t pay any attention to the color of the hand that puts the money down, he just looks at that tax form to see the amount of money due, then he counts the money to see if the amount is correct. If so, he just stamps it paid, hands me my receipt, and I go on my way. So you see, *we* pay for your playground and your swimming pool *too*, therefore I see no reason that either you or I should swim on a particular day.”

Everybody sat in silence pondering what I said. Finally, the leader put out her cigarette, smiled for the first time, and leaning toward me she said, “Say, you’re educated, ain’t yah?” I couldn’t help but smile as I replied, “Well, I’ve got a little bit.” Then she said, “You win. We don’t like it and we never will, but I guess there isn’t anything we can do about it, so we’ll go.” And that was the end of separate swimming days at Owl’s Nest and all of the rest of the public playground pools in the city. The Recreation Commission quietly abolished the policy of separate days.³⁹

From 1957 on Coffey served as a board member and then secretary of the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials (NAIRO). In 1960 the MFRC hosted NAIRO’s annual meeting

³⁹ Virginia Coffey, “Civil Rights and Intergroup Relations,” CHRC Records.

where Coffey presided over a general session attended by officials from across the Midwest including Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Grand Rapids, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and Youngstown.⁴⁰ The following year her reputation moved beyond the national to the international through an invitation to consult on race relation issues for the Standing Councils of Social Service in England. She visited seven British cities that were experiencing high levels of immigration from former colonies in Africa. In addition to helping the cities identify and ameliorate causes for racial strife, Coffey noted that she “placed high value on the supporting role of municipal government, and the teamwork of paid staff and citizen volunteers” in defusing tense racial situations.⁴¹ In short, she was promoting the MFRC model in England.

In 1963 Virginia Coffey resigned after more than fourteen years of staff service to the MFRC. Feeling isolated in the bureaucratic confines of city hall, she told an interviewer:

I felt we didn't really know what was happening and couldn't *feel* what was happening. It was like we were sitting up there in an Ivory Tower and that everybody was out there suffering and having all kinds of problems and we'd try to advise them. We weren't a part of it, so we didn't know. I had the conviction I wanted to get out there with the populace.⁴²

She worked as the community relations supervisor for Seven Hills Neighborhood Houses (1963-1965), before becoming the executive director of Memorial Community Center where she served for two-and-a-half years (1965-1968).⁴³ During this time she got the grassroots experience she was seeking in the city's low-income black and Appalachian neighborhoods such as the East End, the West End, and Over-the-Rhine.

On February 8, 1968, Virginia Coffey returned to city hall to become the first African American woman to serve as executive director of the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission (CHRC), the successor to the Mayor's Friendly Relations Committee. A front page article in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* described her as having “a pleasant face and easy laugh” combined with “a no-nonsense

⁴⁰ National Association of Human Rights Officers, “Looking Ahead in Intergroup Relations,” program for 1960 annual meeting, Box 2, Coffey Papers; “Cincinnati Plans Meeting of Race Relations Group,” *Cleveland Call & Post*, September 10, 1960, Box 2, Coffey Papers.

⁴¹ Virginia Coffey, “England's New Racial Problems and Remedial Efforts as Seen by an American Intergroup Specialist,” mimeo report, 1961, Box 24, Cincinnati Urban League Records, Cincinnati History Library and Archives, Cincinnati, OH; “Mrs. Coffey To Speak,” unattributed newspaper clip dated June 21, 1962, clipping file, Coffey Papers.

⁴² Interview of Virginia Coffey by Stephanie Corsbie, Cincinnati Women Audio Collection.

⁴³ Josten, “No-Nonsense Beliefs.”

drive to accomplish whatever job may be at hand.” In the same article a colleague noted he had seen “her tough facts-and-figures stance devastate more than one surface-type argument.”⁴⁴

Coffey had been executive director for less than two months when racial tensions in Cincinnati escalated following the April 4 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. An April 8 memorial service in Cincinnati’s Avondale neighborhood was orderly until a black man trying to prevent his liquor store from being robbed accidentally shot and killed his wife. Rumors circulated that his wife was killed by white police officers, and the ensuing riot lasted until April 12. Despite a curfew and the presence of some 1,500 National Guard troops, seventy fires were set, two people were killed, many were injured, and hundreds were arrested.

Throughout this time Virginia Coffey and her deputy director, Thomas Garner, represented the CHRC both in city hall and among Avondale Community Council (ACC) members. After the King assassination schools across the city began closing. On behalf of Mayor Eugene Ruehlmann, who was nervous about “putting all those children on the street,” Coffey phoned Dr. Paul Miller, superintendent of schools, requesting he not allow this to happen.⁴⁵ Miller responded that the decision had been made by individual principals who were already being faced with “unruly” students and others engaged in hallway sit-ins in honor of King. Coffey wondered aloud whether principals and staff “might not be ingenious enough to plan memorial programs for the day, with students doing the planning, performing, etc.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless the school closings went on, putting students on the streets.

Coffey and Garner continued to mediate between the city, the Avondale Community Council, the West End Community Council, and unnamed “groups of militants.” Their advice on behalf of the CHRC was sought by the mayor, various city council members, the safety director, police chief, city manager, city solicitor, and National Guard officers. When local white clergy announced a “Sympathy March” in Avondale, demonstrating their sorrow at Dr. King’s death, and scheduled it to coincide with the black-only memorial service for him, four representatives of the CHRC, including Coffey, let them know “very emphatically” that “their March would not be welcomed.”⁴⁷

While clerical staff maintained the CHRC office on “Black Monday,” the day of the King memorial service in Avondale, other staff and board members were in the West End, Mt. Auburn,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Chronicle of CHRC’s Involvement On [sic] Racial Disturbance April 4 – 12, 1968,” unsigned, undated mimeo, Box 7, CHRC Records.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Walnut Hills, and Avondale monitoring conditions in each neighborhood. Thomas Garner attended a briefing for black police officers assigned to the memorial service. Coffey and Garner met at the office of the Avondale Community Council with two black CHRC board members and attended the memorial service with them. She was very complimentary of the ACC's security guards, made up of citizens who tried to maintain order by directing traffic, helping disperse the crowd, and protecting neighborhood businesses. But their efforts were in vain because the shooting at the liquor store occurred just after the memorial service concluded:

Shortly afterward, [ACC officer] Clyde Vinegar took Mrs. Coffey by the hand, approached [police] Specialist Hill, and indicated he should call in the police stationed just outside of the area; that things had gotten out of hand, and people could no longer be controlled. Specialist Hill made the call and Mrs. Coffey and Tom Garner left. As they left heavy billows of smoke were coming from [the intersection of] Rockdale and Reading Road and people were moving from the area fast.⁴⁸

Led by Coffey, CHRC staff and board members did what they could to intervene in a tense situation over which they ultimately had no control. An internal memo, while not completely objective, summarized the CHRC's activities in the tumultuous times of April, 1968, in glowing terms:

CHRC's involvement was significant and timely. Board and staff assisted city officials in arranging communication between them and community leaders; served as a consultant to the Mayor, school superintendent and others. Also were active participants in Negro community program[s]; issued statements to press when necessary; received complaints. In so doing, confidence in the agency is growing and a positive image is being achieved.⁴⁹

Apparently Coffey also projected a positive image. Her steady demeanor during and after the riot impressed the city council's Republican majority who, in late 1968, began considering her for an appointment to fill a recent vacancy on city council. Coffey let it be known she was not interested in the appointment.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Virginia Coffey, "City Manager's Meeting at St. Edmund's Camp," 1969 memo to Cincinnati City Manager Richard Krabach, mimeo, Box 7, CHRC Records.

⁵⁰ "Two Prominent Negroes Eyed For Council Post," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 11, 1968, 1.

In the closing months of the decade Coffey turned her attention to reorganizing the commission into five divisions: Community Relations, Education, Employment, Land Use, and Law. Within each division were three to seven committees tasked with a) “advising and consulting” (e.g., with unions and contractors on hiring practices); b) “participating” (e.g., studies, research, publications); c) “training” (e.g., public speaking, sensitivity training for police and firefighters); and “observing” (e.g., sending representatives to meetings of the school board or the Community Chest). Coffey also sought additional staff to implement this new structure, particularly field workers who would focus on the predominantly black neighborhoods of the West End, Over-the-Rhine, Mt. Auburn, Avondale, Walnut Hills, and Evanston.⁵¹

As early as 1971 Coffey identified good police-community relations as “the most pressing need in every urban center in the country.”⁵² The plan she devised foreshadowed the nationally recognized Cincinnati Police Division’s community relations collaborative agreement entered into in 2002:

[CHRC field staff would arrange] conferences or meetings between citizens and city officials to deal with racial matters having tension and conflict potential. The abrasive relationship between the police and minority communities is a major and explosive source of grievance and tension. Field staff must do everything possible to bridge the gap between neighborhood people and police. This can be done by organizing and staffing small intimate meetings between police on the beat and grass roots people.⁵³

Under Virginia Coffey’s direction the CHRC board was expanded to its former complement of eighteen and the staff grew from five to fourteen by 1973. One of Coffey’s efforts as executive director was to reinvigorate the organization’s waning attention to the city’s Appalachian community. Aware of Marshall Bragdon’s efforts in this regard over the two previous decades, she converted his social service approach into an empowerment strategy.

Nearly ten years after sponsoring an inaugural conference on southern migrants, the MFRC under Bragdon held another conference in 1963. All the “right” people were there – the health commissioner, the superintendent of schools, the welfare director, along with representatives of

⁵¹ Cincinnati Human Relations Commission, “1969 Annual Report,” CHRC Records.

⁵² “Police Called Target For Black Frustrations,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 19, 1971, 10.

⁵³ Coffey, “City Manager’s Meeting at St. Edmund’s,” CHRC Records.

the municipal court, the city housing division, and the state office of employment services – discussing the “poor adjustments” being made by the newcomers.⁵⁴ Although folks from the Council of the Southern Mountains and Berea College also got a word in, invited participation from the local Appalachian community was minimal. Urban Appalachians were considered the topic, not the experts.

Virginia Coffey had a different perspective gained from her years at Riverview Neighborhood House in the East End and as director of the Memorial Community Center in Over-the-Rhine. In both places she worked closely with Appalachian neighborhood leaders, coming to respect their ability to meet the challenges they were encountering. True to her vision of the CHRC helping to empower all groups in the city, Coffey led the effort to establish the Urban Appalachian Council (UAC) in the early 1970s. Despite opposition from some members of the commission, she worked closely with Appalachian leaders Ernie Mynatt and Michael Maloney, initially through the Appalachian Committee. She later hired Maloney to be the “Appalachian specialist” on her staff and provided partial funding to help the Appalachian advocacy organization gain the momentum it needed to become a freestanding agency.⁵⁵ It was at this time that the CHRC sponsored a report by Maloney called “The Social Areas of Cincinnati: An Analysis of Social Needs.” Decennial updates of this census-based study, which included black and Appalachian neighborhoods, would continue to inform social service decision making in the city for the next fifty years.⁵⁶

Coffey’s vision of the CHRC as an incubator for self-governing advocacy organizations such as the UAC would, in subsequent decades, lead the commission to support the rights of ex-felons, the GLBTQ community, people with physical or mental disabilities, coalitions of neighborhoods, and others. Meanwhile, Virginia Coffey’s efforts to organize her human relations colleagues nationwide did not stop. In the late 1960s NAIRO fell on financial hard times. In 1971 Coffey was among the leaders who helped reorganize the remnants of that organization into the National Association of Human Rights Workers, which still exists today.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Bragdon, “MFRC 1943– 1965,” Spiegel Papers.

⁵⁵ Interview of Virginia Coffey by Thomas E. Wagner, tapes and transcript in interviewer’s possession, Cincinnati, OH, 1990.

⁵⁶ Thomas E. Wagner and Phillip J. Obermiller, *Valuing Our Past Creating Our Future: The Founding of the Urban Appalachian Council* (Berea, KY: Berea College Press, 1999).

⁵⁷ Cincinnati Human Relations Commission, “1971 Annual Report,” Box 35, CHRC Records.

Virginia Coffey was sixty-four when she took on the role of executive director in 1968 and seventy when she resigned from the commission in 1974. In her words:

People can't seem to believe that anyone could leave because everything is in *good* shape. I wanted to resign at a time when the Commission is in a healthy state, with its future bright, when the transition from one director to another will be smooth. I accomplished what I came here to do, and now I want to move into a new phase of my career.⁵⁸

According to Arzell Nelson, whom she mentored at CHRC, it was not an easy departure:

Mrs. Coffey had a tough time in her later years. To be honest with you, the real secret is that she was really forced out of CHRC. Yeah. It was sad because she didn't have enough retirement. ... They forced her out of CHRC because they said she was too old and it was time for her to go.⁵⁹

Adding to the unease of her departure, State Auditor Thomas E. Ferguson challenged a \$2,191 retirement payment the CHRC board made to her and demanded she return those funds.⁶⁰ This was old hat for Coffey, who had been a staff member in the mid-1950s when then State Auditor James Rhodes challenged the entire appropriation city council made to MFRC as illegal. Marshall Bragdon had quietly but firmly pointed out that the auditor was wrong because his challenge was based on the 1943 resolution founding MFRC, rather than the contract for services the city entered into with the committee in 1949.⁶¹ In similar fashion, the CHRC board, which included several attorneys, fired back a three-page letter pointing out to Ferguson that the board had scrupulously followed its own articles of incorporation; moreover, the State of Ohio had no jurisdiction over the internal workings of a private corporation such as the CHRC. The letter chastised the auditor for “cast[ing] a shadow on the integrity of Mrs. Virginia Coffey” and officially requested “a public

⁵⁸ “Director Resigning December 31st,” *Human Relations Newsletter*, August-September, 1973. Newsletter published on behalf of the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission. Copies of the newsletter accessed at the Cincinnati History Library and Archives.

⁵⁹ Arzell Nelson interview by Michael E. Maloney, tapes and transcript in interviewer's possession, Cincinnati, OH, 2015.

⁶⁰ “Auditor Rules Against Funds For Mrs. Coffey,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 3, 1975, 14. The retirement payment was based on one week's salary for each four years of her employment as well as for accumulated vacation pay.

⁶¹ “State Questions Expenditures of Friendly Relations Committee,” *Cincinnati Post*, November 19, 1956.

apology to Mrs. Coffey and the CHRC.”⁶² There is no record of either an apology from Ferguson or a refund from Coffey.

Following her resignation from the CHRC Coffey worked as an independent human relations consultant. One of her major clients was the University of Cincinnati where she advised on race relations both on campus and between the university and the predominantly black neighborhoods surrounding it.⁶³ In 1977 the Memorial Community Center honored Coffey for her work at the Center and in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood.⁶⁴

By then Coffey was accustomed to serving on local and state boards, as well as having the high quality of her service acknowledged. During the 1960s she was honored as a *Cincinnati Enquirer* Woman of the Year, elected a board member of the Cincinnati Community Action Commission, and elected to the executive board of the Social Service Association. She was also appointed to the advisory committees of the Cincinnati Community Chest, the Hamilton County Welfare Department, and the Ohio Civil Rights Commission.⁶⁵ She was prominent among black women’s organizations including the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, Zonta International, and The Links.⁶⁶ Cincinnati’s Xavier University conferred an honorary Doctor of Laws on her during its 1972 commencement. The following year she received the Governor’s Award for Community Excellence from Ohio Governor John J. Gilligan,⁶⁷ as well as a commendation for “Service in the Field of Human Rights” from the National Association of Human Rights Workers.⁶⁸

While working full-time as executive director of the West End YWCA Coffey attended the University of Cincinnati (UC), earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Education in 1938.⁶⁹ Later she switched sides of the desk and began giving lectures to freshman sociology and education classes at UC.⁷⁰ The University named her a “Distinguished Alumnus” in 1972.⁷¹

⁶² “CHRC Answers State Auditor,” *Human Relations Newsletter*, July 1975; “Apology Asked of Ohio Auditor,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 14, 1975, 28.

⁶³ “Joins UC,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 21, 1974, 17.

⁶⁴ “Honored at Memorial Community Center,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 28, 1977; Memorial Community Center, “In Appreciation: Mrs. Virginia Coffey,” mimeo, copy in the first author’s possession, Cincinnati, OH.

⁶⁵ “Spotlight on Our Director,” *Human Relations Newsletter*, June 1972; “Mrs. V. Coffey, C & P Writer, Off To England,” *Cleveland Call & Post*, June 24, 1961.

⁶⁶ “Elected,” *Human Relations Newsletter*, October 1968; Rebecca Goodman, “Virginia Coffey Fought Against Discrimination,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 30, 2003, 22; Rosemary Davis, “Links, Aristocracy of Cincinnati’s Black Women, Serves Others,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 15, 1974, 23.

⁶⁷ “Appalachian Week in Review,” *Human Relations Newsletter*, October 1972.

⁶⁸ “Freedom Fighters – From the Hall of Everyday Heroes,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 1, 2004, 132.

⁶⁹ “UC Awards Diplomas to 970,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 4, 1938, 6.

⁷⁰ “Pre-School Unit To Hear Talk By Mrs. Coffey,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 6, 1961, 14.

⁷¹ “Biographical Data,” Box 1, Coffey Papers.

In personal conversations with those who worked with her, two sides of Virginia Coffey appear. People perceived her as “bright, warm-hearted, enthusiastic.” She and her husband, whom she simply referred to as “Coffey,” had no children and apparently few if any hobbies, but they frequently participated in interracial discussion groups held in participants’ homes. She was an intent listener who often provided an alternative perspective to others’ ideas with the question: “Have you thought about...?” Although she was fluent in black street patois, in public settings her careful diction, meticulous attire, and quiet demeanor reflected a strong sense of professionalism. In her public speeches and informal conversations she stayed focused on what she knew, but did not hesitate to share her vision of the future. Alluding to the innumerable presentations she made over her career, one colleague said of Coffey’s speaking style: “She wasn’t exactly dynamic, but everyone listened when she spoke. It was the content, not her style, that held their attention.”⁷² Perhaps that was because Coffey always aimed to get beyond talk to implementation:

I feel that everybody’s point of view must be heard and listened to. I think there ought to be opportunities for explanations. With these things on the table, it is time to come up with constructive ideas and plans.⁷³

Virginia Coffey was soft-spoken and gracious, at times extroverted, but not forthcoming about her private life. Always well-prepared for the tasks she faced, she was conscientious about details and expected the same of those with whom she worked, including both CHRC staff and commissioners. Her personal and professional life experiences gave her the self-confidence and credibility to work on an equal footing with the public officials, civic and religious leaders, business executives, educators, community groups, and individual citizens, many of whom came to rely on her judgment.

Reflecting on her long career in human relations, however, Virginia Coffey wondered if she had in fact made a difference:

⁷² Judith Bogart Meredith interviewed by Phillip J. Obermiller, November 17, 2015, Cincinnati, OH, notes in first author’s possession; Michael E. Maloney interviewed by Phillip J. Obermiller, November 18, 2015, Cincinnati, OH, notes in first author’s possession; Louise Spiegel interviewed by Phillip J. Obermiller, November 20, 2015, Cincinnati, OH, notes in first author’s possession; Helen Black interviewed by Phillip J. Obermiller, December 6, 2015, Cincinnati, OH, notes in first author’s possession.

⁷³ Josten, “No-Nonsense Beliefs.”

I greatly regret the fact that we now have few, if any channels of communication to help us get to know each other; [few] opportunities for face-to-face discussion on race relations or any other human rights issues, for that matter. ... I suppose I sound a bit pessimistic, and I shouldn't, but I am concerned because I don't see progress in race relations. ... I see no leadership, black or white, with the commitment and charisma to pull us all together toward a common goal.⁷⁴

Despite these misgivings, she once told an interviewer, "If the situation seemed insurmountable, I always wanted to be there."⁷⁵

As immigration streams from Mexico, Central America, Asia, and Africa continue to flow into the Midwest, the work of Virginia Coffey becomes an important template for twenty-first-century human relations efforts.⁷⁶ Adaptations will have to be made for the nonmetropolitan and rural destinations of many of these new migrants, but the fundamental principles of communication and mutual respect that Virginia Coffey tirelessly promoted provide a model for future efforts. She also left a bit of advice for those who would follow in her footsteps: "Getting people to know and like each other is hard work, but it is satisfying. It is a field of work where you have to forget about yourself and think of the total community."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Coffey, "Civil Rights and Intergroup Relations Institutions," CHRC Records.

⁷⁵ Coffey interview, Harris Collection.

⁷⁶ Katherine Fennelly, "Prejudice Towards Immigrants in the Midwest," in *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*, 151-178 (see note #5); David Griffith, "New Midwesterners, New Southerners: Immigration Experiences in Four Rural American Settings," in *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*, 179-210 (see note #5).

⁷⁷ Allen Howard, "Coffey's goal to get people to talk, listen," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 21, 1989, 23.