

Aileen Cooke and Olivia Hooker, the first African-American SPARs, at Coast Guard boot camp in 1945, Manhattan Beach Training Station, N.Y.



Courtesy Olivia Hooker

SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES: THE STORY OF OLIVIA HOOKER

Overcoming adversity, SPAR devotes her life to developing others' potential



Lynn Pachon

For Olivia Hooker, the first black woman to enlist in the SPARs, the Coast Guard Women's Reserve, in 1945, taking advantage of opportunities for human service has been a way of life.

"I hate to see those opportunities not used," said Hooker, a retired clinical psychologist.

Her work has continued as a consulting psychologist at the Fred S. Keeler School in Yonkers, N.Y., teaching children with behavioral disabilities who do not qualify for Head Start or other pre-school programs.

Eager to serve her country during World War II, Hooker was among more than 10,000 women who volunteered to serve in the SPARs in ratings like yeoman, gunner's mate, parachute rigger and radioman.

She was among five black women to

enlist in the SPARs before 1946. The other four women were Aileen Cooke-Moore, Yvonne Cumberpatch, Daisy Winifred Byrd and Julia Mosely.

In an era of racial prejudice in the military, Hooker's enlistment was discouraged. She recalls, ironically, it was not the recruiter who tried to discourage her.

"The recruiter was highly professional, supportive and absolutely top flight," she said. "It was a superior officer, sent from St. Louis, who made a special trip to Columbus, Ohio, with the specific aim of keeping me from being sworn in. She interviewed me at length, and assured me I was letting myself in for the worst," said Hooker.

After the officer returned to St.

Louis, Hooker was still determined to go forward. Pleased to be the first to enlist a black woman, the recruiter gave her the oath.

After Hooker's enlistment, she trained at Manhattan Beach Training Station, N.Y., and found tutoring that enabled her to become a second class yeoman. She served as a yeoman to the separation officer at the Coast Guard Separation Center in Boston until 1946, processing discharges by the Rights and Benefits Section.

Born in Muskogee, Okla., Hooker received a bachelor's degree in education with a minor in psychology from Ohio State University in 1937. She went on to earn a master's in psychological services from Columbia University in 1947 and a

doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Rochester in 1962.

The White Plains, N.Y., resident is also the recipient of awards and citations that include the Graduate Fellow Award from the University of Rochester, Outstanding Teacher Award from the Graduate Students' Association of Fordham University and the Women's History Association's annual award.

For Hooker, the drive for education and service started in childhood. Her parents, Samuel and Anita Hooker, inspired her to strive for excellence. An entrepreneur, he father established a department store in Tulsa, Okla., where the family later moved. And her mother was a teacher.

Hooker, one of five children, recalls her parent's determination to expose their children to the best education advantages in an era when black achievement stirred riots — riots she witnessed.

A patriotic child, Hooker said she recalls feeling devastated at age six by race riots in Tulsa. In 1921, the Ku Klux Klan burned Tulsa's black homes and businesses including her father's department store.

"That race riot was the first time I had seen that one race could be hostile to another," said Hooker. "This for a child who was so patriotic was devastating."

Quickly, her parents, concerned about their children's well-being, moved the family to Topeka, Kansas, where educational opportunities for black children were good.

"I think those early years in Topeka schools made me what I am today," said Hooker.

She recalls Topeka's dedicated teachers and excellent libraries, where black children were encouraged to read.

"Going to Topeka was just like going to paradise for a child," Hooker said. "This to me, I guess, was the saving grace."

Hooker grew up to teach in Columbus elementary schools for nearly 10 years. She went on to work as a senior psychologist, psychological services director and associate administrator at the Kennedy Child Study Center in Manhattan, N.Y., for 22 years before retiring in 1983.

Excelling by taking advantage of early opportunities, Hooker has devoted her life to helping others, particularly youth, develop their potential. Believing character develops through role models and self-esteem, she is concerned about the drift of today's youth into crime.

