

# “Your Place Is Any Place You Want to Be”

By Raven Padgett

Edward W. Brooke’s grandmother often spoke those words to him when he was growing up, (“Your place is any place you want to be”). The words were meant to encourage him to not only imagine his future but to create opportunities that could make it a reality. Powerful words that have inspired him throughout his life. As the first African American elected by popular vote to the U.S. Senate and the first to be seated since Reconstruction, Brooke (B.S. ’41) is a trailblazer in his own right but the election of President Barack Obama, he explains, has added more relevance to his grandmother’s wise directive.

“Those words have more meaning to me now,” says Brooke. “It was always a wonderful thought to know that you could make your own way but now it’s a reality. This is a moment in history that, like so many others, I prayed to live to see happen.”

Brooke sees Obama’s election as the validation that parents and grandparents have long needed when they told young Black children over the years, “You can become anything you want in this country, even the president of the United States.”

Brooke has heeded his grandmother’s sage advice many times in his career, serving as Chairman of the Boston Finance Committee from 1961–1962, Massachusetts Attorney General from 1963–1967, and two terms in the Senate from 1967–1979. When he ran for the Senate seat he also helped carve out a path where a general electorate could believe in a Black politician’s willingness to represent all constituents, regardless of race. His election victories were won resoundingly in a state with a 2 percent Black population.

Brooke said that he had always believed that a predominantly White electorate would vote for a Black candidate once it was assured that a Black candidate could represent their interests, something that Obama has done quite convincingly in the presidential election.

Brooke sees how the past has helped open up the doors of possibility for Obama to be elected and credits Howard University’s activism and role in civil rights for helping to make it happen. “Civil rights legislation was born at Howard with people like Thurgood Marshall and Charlie Houston; medical advances were made here with Charles Drew and Dr. LaSalle Leffall Jr., and let’s not forget Charles Wesley, Rayford Logan and Howard Thurman,” says Brooke. “As a student of Howard I was a beneficiary of that but so many others were beneficiaries who did not attend Howard.”

As Brooke and other civil rights champions pass the torch to a new generation, the former senator is hopeful that Obama’s victory is symbolic of changing attitudes about race in America. “I’ve never seen a better run political organization than his but I believe his victory is attributed more to the man himself and his influence on a new generation of voters. He is calm and cool under fire,” says Brooke. “He talks words of hope and inspires the young and old alike.”

And as he witnesses Obama ascend to a place in history, Brooke adds: “The problems facing our new president are enormous. It’s going to take an understanding electorate. To elect him is one thing but now we should stand behind him and let him do the job. I have a lot of faith in him.”

Padgett is Editor of *Howard Magazine*.

