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**Forum**

# Deborah Partridge Wolfe: Biography of a Kappa Delta Pi Laureate

by Stephanie van Hover

## Abstract

In 1988, Kappa Delta Pi selected Dr. Deborah Partridge Wolfe for membership in its Laureate Chapter. Wolfe, a prominent African-American social educator, dedicated her career in education to living and promoting the key ideals of Kappa Delta Pi's mission: scholarship, excellence, diversity, inquiry, reflection, and fellowship. This biography of Wolfe, who passed away September 3, 2004, offers insight into her long-term commitment and contributions to education. Most of the information contained in this manuscript was provided by Dr. Wolfe during an interview with the author in May and June of 2000.

Deborah Partridge Wolfe was born Olive Deborah Juanita Cannon on December 22, 1916, in Cranford, New Jersey. Her father, Reverend David Wadsworth Cannon, attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and Princeton Seminary in New Jersey before becoming minister of the First Baptist Church of Cranford. For his student pastorate, he was assigned to Ebenezer Baptist Church in New Brunswick, where he met and later married Gertrude Moody.

Reverend Cannon served as a chaplain during World War I. He was seriously injured, and when he returned home was unable to pastor again. It fell upon Wolfe's mother to serve as the head of the family. She worked as a teacher, social worker, lecturer, and activist for the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the women's suffrage movement. In a telephone interview in 2000, a childhood friend of Wolfe's, Vivian Cobb, related that Mrs. Cannon organized local children into a Loyal Temperance Union, requiring members—including her own offspring—to pledge to abstain from alcohol and tobacco. She also involved her children in the fight for the ratification of the 19th

Amendment. As an infant, Wolfe accompanied her mother and sister while they handed out flyers and buttons promoting women's right to vote.

Wolfe expressed a strong sense of pride in her family history. She recalled that her parents were determined to teach her understanding and respect for herself and her heritage. Her parents imbued her with a deep love of people without regard to race and a missionary-like zeal to change people's prejudices through education. Wolfe, in a 1979 interview with Greenlee, asserted that though she learned intense pride in her African-American heritage, her parents also readied her for the European-American world in which she was going to live:

Both of my parents had come through white schools themselves. They had been touched and bothered, but stood stern, strong, and tall in spite of it. . . . They were prepared to give us this kind of readiness . . . we learned what most black people have to learn—that you have to be twice as good to get as far.

Wolfe's active religious life reinforced her respect for all people. She explained:

Religion is not something you do on Sunday. Religion is something that controls your whole life and your moral values. I am a child of God. That's what makes me equal to anybody. After all, 'of one blood God made all to dwell on the face of the earth.'

Wolfe attended Cranford schools, which had an integrated system, for her K–12 education. Despite integration, African-American students were not always welcome. Wolfe vividly recalled her first day of school. European-American children followed her singing, "Nigger, Nigger, never die / Black face and shiny eyes / Crooked nose and crooked toes / That's the way the Nigger goes." She ran home crying to her father, who told her, "Black is honorable." Wolfe reminisced, "I'm so glad he said honorable. Honorable has deep character."

Wolfe's parents always emphasized the vital importance of education. Gregory (1995, 6) noted, "In most black communities, a great value is placed on the role of education because many believe it is the only means for successful employment in American society. There is a strong belief and commitment to advancing in order that each generation can go further and achieve more." Though Wright (1941) found that the majority of African-American students were encouraged to take vocational courses rather than the more challenging college preparatory classes, Wolfe followed the college preparation track and excelled academically. She also was active in extracurricular academic and athletic activities, including the National Honor Society, the history club, tennis, and basketball.

Though the Depression hit Cranford hard in 1929, Wolfe recalled:

It didn't really affect my family because we were poor all of the time. We never had a great deal of money, but we never went hungry. We've always owned our home,

## Van Hover

which made the difference because we never had to worry about being put out of our house.

Financial concerns did, however, prevent Wolfe from attending her dream college—Oberlin College in Ohio—which admitted African Americans as early as the mid-1860s and had a reputation of being a liberal institution friendly to both women and African Americans (Graham 1999). Instead, she entered Jersey City State College, which had a manageable tuition of \$100 per year.

Wolfe majored in social studies education because she believed that the only way to change the nature of society was to understand its people. Wolfe's program included a variety of education courses, including two elementary teaching internships—a second-grade placement and a fourth-grade experience. In her second internship, Wolfe worked with "one of the most creative teachers you could ever have, a woman who let me fly and didn't fence me in." Wolfe described her fourth-grade classroom as a place where every student was busy, where "all kinds of activities were going on in every different corner, so when you walked in you knew this was a place where students are living and learning and not just sitting still waiting for the teacher to tell them what to do."

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Wolfe commuted to Jersey City State College from Cranford and worked several jobs to earn money for train fare, tuition, and books. She taught piano lessons, tutored other students, worked in the cafeteria, and assisted a professor with secretarial duties. During her junior and senior years, Wolfe served as principal and teacher of Cranford's adult night school, which was founded and supported by the Works Progress Administration. Her responsibilities included organizing classes, conducting teacher meetings, teaching courses, and fulfilling administrative responsibilities. Wolfe credited the night school experience with helping her formulate her philosophy of administration, which she described as democratically shared leadership.

While at Jersey City State College, Wolfe won a Lisle Fellowship for a summer program established by Dr. and Mrs. DeWitt Baldwin. The Baldwin's program promoted world peace by creating an environment in which young people from different countries could live and work together toward mutual respect and understanding. The students took seminars in sociology and psychology, ventured into the surrounding areas

to perform community service in teams, and participated in a variety of activities that included directing a community center for migratory laborers, teaching Vacation Bible School, and planning for a community homecoming. The program, which emphasized “World Peace through World Understanding,” challenged students to meet and get to know people from vastly different backgrounds. The Lisle program greatly influenced Wolfe’s views toward community involvement and human relations.

During the summer between her junior and senior years at Jersey City State College, Wolfe accepted a teaching position that changed her life. Inspired by her mother’s stories about the awful conditions of

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southern New Jersey schools, particularly those for the children of migrant laborers, Wolfe took a job with the Federal Council of Churches, teaching migrant workers’ children on the eastern shore of Maryland. Wolfe taught pre-school and school-age children during the day, organized recreational programs at night, and arranged church activities on weekends. She found this experience rewarding, but a harsh lesson in man’s inhumanity to man.

These children were not welcome in local schools or churches, and the only education they received was through these summer programs. The Depression had exacerbated the economic plight of migrant workers; most lived in abject poverty. Wolfe’s frustration was evident in her comments about this experience. “I was trying to teach values and goals and inspire them to dream great dreams, but they never saw what life was supposed to be like, what the goal was. If that’s the case, how can you aspire to it?” She struggled with making education relevant for these students given their abysmal living situations, believing that the students needed special courses through which they could relate their work life with their educational life. She also felt that the typical school curriculum did not address the problems they faced. These concerns led her to Teachers College and Mabel Carney.

### Teachers College and Tuskegee Institute

After graduating from Jersey City State College in 1937, Wolfe entered Teachers College, Columbia University, to pursue a master’s degree in rural and teacher education. She chose Teachers College because of its outstanding reputation and progressive ideas. Wolfe worked closely with Professor Mabel Carney, a woman dedicated to integrating Teachers College. Carney (Daniel 1952) actively recruited African-American students, established a Negro Education Club, created a mentoring system with faculty members who demonstrated an interest in the African-Ameri-

can experience, and developed a course on the educational problems African-American people in the United States faced. Carney also organized a series of lectures that featured prominent political and intellectual leaders, such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, Walter G. Daniel, Mordecai Johnson, and W.E.B. DuBois. Wolfe

described the featured speakers as fighters of freedom before the official struggle began.

Wolfe wanted to use her knowledge of psychology and sociology to plan teacher education programs for students, to use her experience in rural areas to call attention to the effect environment and social situation have on the quality of education, and to plan a curriculum for children and preservice teachers that considers the total societal situation.

After receiving her master's degree, Wolfe accepted a job at Tuskegee Institute to develop their rural elementary education program and laboratory schools. The president of Tuskegee Institute, Dr. Frederick Douglas Patterson, had written to Mabel Carney to recruit applicants for faculty positions. Carney recommended Wolfe and attempted to allay Patterson's concerns about her youth and inexperience. Carney's (1938) letter of recommendation stated:

Miss Cannon is one of the most able young women I have ever known. She has an exceptionally keen mind and also an outstanding personality. Though only 22 years of age, she possesses the maturity,

mentality, and even the experience of a woman much older in years. There is no doubt, in fact, that Miss Cannon will go far in the teaching profession and reflect much credit upon any institution or agency with which she is associated. It is not my usual practice to recommend candidates so young for teacher training and supervision, but I make an exception in Miss Cannon's case because of her outstanding ability, and recommend her highly for both these fields.

At Tuskegee Institute, four departments collaborated with the School of Education in the preparation of teachers: the Physical Education, Home Economics, Agriculture, and Mechanical Industries departments. Wolfe was the director of the elementary education program, supervisor of student teachers, and principal of two of Tuskegee's rural laboratory schools.

## A Return to Teachers College

Wolfe returned to Teachers College in 1943 on a General Education Fellowship to pursue her Doctor of Education degree. She was determined to improve her ability to help alleviate the problems African Americans faced and to upgrade their education. As president of the Colored Alabama State Teachers Association, Wolfe had visited many African-American schools and saw the problems resulting from poor teacher preparation, low educational levels of school supervisors, and health problems of rural students.

She had clear goals in mind: to develop a curriculum relevant for the rural laboratory schools of Tuskegee Institute and to improve preservice teacher preparation. She wanted to use her knowledge of psychology and sociology to plan teacher education programs for students, to use her experience in rural areas to call attention to the effect environment and social situation have on the quality of education, and to plan a curriculum for children and preservice teachers that considers the total societal situation.

In 1944, Wolfe earned a scholarship to attend a summer session at Vassar College to study childhood growth and development. The highlight of the

session was when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt invited the group to Hyde Park for refreshments and a discussion. Wolfe recalled listening to Mrs. Roosevelt talk about things that interested “those of us who were intent on changing the world.” Wolfe called Mrs. Roosevelt one of her heroines “because she was the first First Lady who really cared about all the people and made it abundantly clear that she was not prejudiced.”

Wolfe finished her doctoral studies at Teachers College in 1945. Her dissertation *A Plan for Redesigning the Curriculum of the Rural Laboratory Schools of Tuskegee Institute* (1945) incorporated many ideas and philosophies from her master’s and doctoral course work at Teachers College and her experiences in Alabama. Wolfe asserted that writing her dissertation was a joy because it had meaning in her work, particularly in the rural South and in teacher education programs at African-American colleges. She stated:

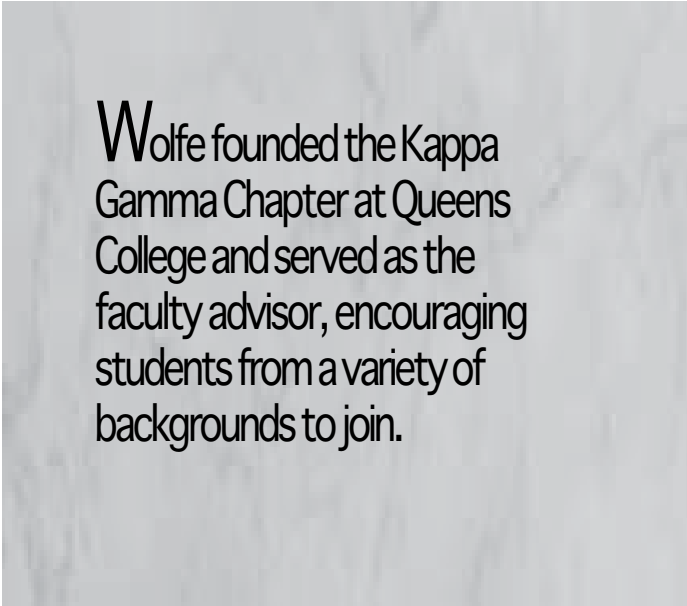
My doctoral program was such a rich experience. It deepened my belief in progressive education. I was able to explain it better and use illustrations and examples from teaching so my students could see philosophy at work. I had more than a verbal commitment. I could apply what I learned.

Kappa Delta Pi recognized Wolfe’s contributions by nominating her for membership in its Laureate Chapter in 1988.



## Return to Tuskegee Institute

Wolfe returned to Tuskegee Institute as the first faculty member—other than the school's president—with an earned doctorate degree. She founded and served as director of the school's education graduate program from 1945–1950, working with Grambling Institute of Northern Louisiana and teachers who were trained with money from a fund established by Anna T. Jeanes, a Quaker woman who wanted to advance rudimentary education in small African-American rural schools (National Association of Supervisors and Consultants Interim History Writing Committee 1979). Wolfe



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taught the Jeanes's teachers graduate course work so that they could instruct teachers in rural areas and supervise schools. She required all students to write a master's thesis—a more rigorous requirement than at Teachers College where students could choose to either write a master's thesis or take additional course work. Wolfe required the thesis because she felt students needed experience writing at a high level. By 1953, Tuskegee had 116 graduate students enrolled in the program.

### Queens College

Wolfe took a leave of absence from Tuskegee Institute in 1950 to work on advanced postdoctoral study at the University of Pennsylvania in research methods and statistical analysis. She wanted to experience a graduate program different than the one at Teachers College. The University of Pennsylvania was more subject-oriented, more traditional, less welcoming to African Americans, and less willing to deal with issues related to race, diversity, and gender.

While at the University of Pennsylvania, Wolfe taught education courses as a visiting professor at New York University and Queens College, City University of New York (CUNY). Wolfe accepted a full-time faculty position at Queens College when Patterson, her advocate, resigned as president of Tuskegee Institute to become educational director of the Phelps Stokes Fund.

Wolfe was appointed Assistant Professor of Education in 1951, making her the first African-American professor on the Queens College faculty. She earned tenure in 1954 and remained at Queens College until 1962 when she took a leave of absence to work for the United States House of Representatives as Education Chief of the Committee on Education and Labor.

## House of Representatives

As Education Chief, Wolfe coordinated all educational matters coming before the full committee. She also kept all members of the committee informed and taught them about the complexities of the bills. She also served as the liaison between the House of Representatives and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare on all educational matters. She researched and wrote legislation, arranged and attended hearings, drafted reports, provided members of the committee with pertinent information, and briefed her counterpart in the Senate. She described her position in this way:

I was responsible for guiding all education legislation through the process in the Committee for

Education and Labor from its conception until it became public law. My first job was to talk with the lawyers, whose specialty is writing legislation, and I would be the one to provide the substance so they could put it into legal terminology. Then I would sit down with Adam Clayton Powell and decide which subcommittee the bill would go to. I coordinated with the staff of the subcommittee to determine when we would have hearings, and I would invite people who asked to be heard, as well as people I felt could give some background data. We wanted to make sure we had enough expert witnesses testifying on all aspects of the legislation. I talked directly with the Congress people, and would ask 'Are there areas in this bill that you would like to have more explanation [on] through witnesses?' I'd write up the testimony, summarize changes needed for the law, prepare presentations, and get Adam and the other [committee members] ready to answer questions on the floor of the House.

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Wolfe worked closely with Committee Chairman Powell. According to Hamilton (1991, 348), "Powell was particularly impressed at the way Wolfe carefully organized committee hearings, preparing a brief summary for each section of the bill to be considered and presenting the witnesses in a consecutive, orderly manner that would facilitate the committee members' ability to follow the testimony." In a letter to Queens College requesting an extension of Wolfe's leave, Powell (1963) wrote, "I have found Dr. Wolfe to be exceptionally competent and knowledgeable regarding all levels of education. She has developed many Committee Prints . . . that have been of immeasurable value to members of Congress as they make important decisions on education matters." During her tenure, Wolfe guided many bills through the committee, of which 35 were passed into law, including the Economic Opportunity Act (War on Poverty), the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.



## Van Hover

The civil rights agenda also came to the forefront during this period. Wolfe played an active role in the movement, belonging to the NAACP and serving as vice president of the National Council for Negro Women and “grand-basileus” of her African-American sorority Zeta Phi Beta. She did extensive public speaking in support of the movement, and worked on the educational aspects of Johnson’s civil rights legislation. Wolfe participated in the now famous march down Constitution Avenue, in the second row behind Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She recalled waiting to hear his now famous “I Have a Dream” speech:

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Here we were, of all races and creeds, walking down Constitution Avenue. We actually held hands, black and white together, and sang ‘We Shall Overcome’ and other songs of love, harmony, and peace. Constitution Avenue is, in itself, a symbol of America and what it stands for: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’ I think the whole emphasis of the Constitu-

tion is that each individual is important in order to make America really a democracy. On the grandstand, I sat next to a Jewish white man from Boston and he asked if I was a life member of the NAACP. I said no, but I had been a member my whole life. Right there, on that day, on that platform, I wrote a check for life membership in the NAACP. I thought it was so significant that this Jewish white man from Boston asked a black woman who was fighting for civil rights to become a life member. You could feel the momentum, the spirit of unity, the potential of America; all of us working together for justice, equality, and opportunity. That one day exemplified the American dream like no other day in my life.

## Return to Queens

Wolfe left her position as Education Chief in 1965. Her son had stayed in Cranford while she was in Washington and was a senior in high school. She recalled, “It was time for me to go home and take care of my boy. There are certain times when a child needs the parents. It was the last part of his senior year, and I went on back. Though I would have loved to stay [as Education Chief], I was never sorry.”

Wolfe returned to and spent the remainder of her academic career at Queens College, teaching many courses, including elementary methods and foundations of education. She also conducted elementary education workshops, supervised student teach-

ers, and became actively involved with the laboratory schools. She witnessed several reorganizations of the College's Department of Education, including the separation of the Elementary Education and Secondary Education departments.

Wolfe was involved in numerous committees and school groups, including working on the faculty council, serving as affirmative action officer, and sponsoring Kappa Delta Pi, International Honor Society in Education. She initiated a travel-study abroad program to Africa and worked on a program that helped students who entered Queens at a lower academic level.

## Retirement

Wolfe continued her lifelong involvement in numerous organizations after her retirement and achieved many firsts as an African-American female. She was the first African-American woman to be named a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, to become a member of and later chair the New Jersey State Board of Higher Education, and to serve as a member of the Educational Foundation of Kappa Delta Pi. She was the only African-American member on the Seton Hall University Board of Regents, the advisory board to Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, the Coordinating Council on Education for New Jersey, and the board of the American Association of University Women. In recognition of her lifelong commitment to education, she was awarded more than 26 honorary doctorates. A high school in Macon County, Alabama, and a dormitory at Trenton State College in New Jersey were named in her honor.

When asked how her gender affected her career, Wolfe posited that if she were a man, she might have been a minister first and a teacher second. As it happened, she became a teacher first and a preacher later in life.

While teaching at Queens College, Wolfe studied theology at Union Theological Seminary and was ordained to the Christian ministry in 1970. She served as Associate Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Cranford, New Jersey, and taught feminist theology as a

visiting scholar and lecturer at Princeton Theological Seminary. She was the first woman elected President of the New Jersey Convention of Progressive Baptists and served as Parliamentarian for the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Wolfe also enjoyed her "career" as mother and grandmother, spending time with her son and grandchildren.

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## Van Hover

### Wolfe and KDP

Wolfe joined the Kappa Chapter of KDP in 1938 and remained active in the organization throughout her career. She founded the Kappa Gamma Chapter at Queens College and served as the faculty advisor, encouraging students from a variety of backgrounds to join. She hoped that the Society could serve as

a means through which and by which I can encourage students who show unusual ability and great promise an opportunity for more leadership, not on a campus-wide level, but on a regional and statewide and national level. I see KDP not only for my own enrichment, which it must be, but also for what it can do for the students with whom I work, and their opportunity to become broader.

The Queens College chapter honored Wolfe with a dinner tribute in May 1984, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the chapter and Wolfe's pending retirement. Former student Bunny Sabatino thanked Wolfe for her extended and active service to the chapter. In her speech, she said:

I was very much afraid that I could never find the appropriate words to convey the way we feel about you. I know that my life has been greatly enriched by my having had you as my teacher and having you now as my friend. I believe that everyone here tonight feels the same way, so please accept this gift . . . as a token of our esteem for a truly great educator, humanitarian, and friend.

Wolfe served Kappa Delta Pi at the national level as well. Frank E. Marsh, emeritus member of the Society's Educational Foundation Board, asserted that Wolfe brought important and unique contributions to Kappa Delta Pi and the field of education through her educational, religious, and political background. In a 2001 letter, he wrote, "Her experiences as Education Chief, a member of the New Jersey Board of Education, and an active participant in the civil rights struggle provided myriad opportunities for her to be a persistent and respected voice often crying in the wilderness as a champion for higher education for all Americans. Her religious interests and her role as an ordained minister also brought an important element to her views on education and contributions."

Kappa Delta Pi recognized Wolfe's contributions by nominating her for membership in its Laureate Chapter in 1988. Marsh stated, "The Laureate Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi reads like a Who's Who of our profession, including such prominent educators as John Dewey, William Bagley, William Kilpatrick, and John Childs." As evidenced by her commitment to the ideals of the Society and her accomplishments, Wolfe is a deserving member.

The Society, through its Educational Foundation, supports multicultural education through the Deborah Partridge Wolfe Laureate Doctoral Scholarship in Multicultural Education, awarded annually.

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