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Actress encourages lawmakers to work for social justice

By Regina L. Burns
The Associated Press

Award-winning actress Ruby Dee drew upon the writings of civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois and a speech by her late husband on Thursday to urge members of the National Black Caucus of State Legislators to continue working toward economic freedom and social justice.

Dee, 82, keynoted the group's opening session in downtown Jackson. Earlier Thursday, she received the 2007 Pfizer Humanitarian of the Year award.



Dee

Dee and her late husband, actor Ossie Davis, put their careers in jeopardy by opposing McCarthyism in the 1950s. They were the masters of ceremonies for the 1963 March on Washington, where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. Davis died in February 2005.

"Art for the sake of art is of no value. It's not a question of being stars and celebrities.

We used the arts as part of our struggle," Dee told the audience, excerpting a speech her husband gave in 2003.

She said rather than focusing on "We Shall Overcome" someday as she and Ossie used to sing, the focus is no longer in the distant future.

"Today is ours; let's take it," she said.

Dee later talked about the images of Mississippi that she grew up with as a child.

"I thought of Mississippi as God's hell hole. As a kid, I saw pictures of all the horrible things that black people experienced."

But that image has changed over the years, especially during the three trips she has made to Mississippi this year. One of those trips was to actor Morgan Freeman's rural home in Tallahatchie County for a writers' conference.

"I realized I was seeing a revised social picture. I visited the site of Emmett Till's death. I couldn't believe that those things could happen today."

She said Mississippi is one of the most evolved regions and that it is fertile ground for eliminating poverty.

Mississippi Rep. Mary Coleman, D-Jackson, is president of the National Caucus, which was formed 30 years ago. She said Dee "invigorated the audience. She challenged us to go back and work harder."

U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., the incoming chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, speaks at the convention on Saturday.

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