



Rebekah Hebbert | Sunday, 12 December 2010
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Heroine of human dignity: Mildred Fay Jefferson

The first black woman to graduate from Harvard medical school used her position to defend the humanity of the unborn.

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Being a trailblazer takes a great deal of courage. Someone has remarked, perhaps rather cynically, "You can always tell who the pioneers are because they have arrows in their back and are lying face down in the dirt." But sometimes the pioneers and trailblazers do triumph through their struggles, and achieve their goals and dreams to the admiration of the world. At that point, how many would have the courage to re-enter the fray -- to achieve success, and then risk marginalization and mockery all over again to stand up for a controversial cause?

Dr Mildred Fay Jefferson, who died on October 15, chalked up a lot of firsts. She was the first black woman to graduate from the Harvard medical school, the first woman to be a surgical intern at Boston City Hospital, and the first female doctor at the Boston University Medical Centre.



She was also -- and here comes the potential arrow-in-the-back move -- a key figure in the American pro-life movement, playing foundational roles in the Value of Life Committee of Massachusetts, the National Right to Life Committee and Black Americans for Life, and actively involving herself with other right to life groups.

What propelled her along this path was the great betrayal of unborn life by her own profession: in 1970 the American Medical Association decreed that it was ethical for doctors to perform abortion where the procedure was legal. For her this was an elementary violation of the most fundamental principles of her profession. The Hippocratic Oath, and a Judeo-Christian ethic demanded better of a physician, as a person and as a professional.

When in 1973 the Supreme Court decision Roe v. Wade imposed legalised abortion on all states, Dr Jefferson [fought against](#) the "almost unlimited licence to kill" it gave to doctors -- a licence that she believed could impair the right of doctors to refrain from killing. "The doctor who willingly accepts destroying life will have no grounds on which to object if the state should compel that doctor to destroy life," she [contended](#).

This statement, made in the 1970s, seems eerily prescient today as conscience rights for health care workers who object to abortion are coming under heavy fire, and [in some quarters are lost](#). Dr. Jefferson foresaw what she considered unacceptable violations of physicians', and ultimately everyone's, freedoms. She [asserted](#) elsewhere that doctors "must exert their rights and obligations or we will be the first slaves of the state and you will soon join us."

For Mildred Jefferson wasn't just concerned about the integrity of physicians. She [saw abortion](#) as a moral issue for all people. As a civil rights issue, as an issue of "fairness and justice, love and compassion and liberty with law" that crossed all human boundaries. She believed that it was not only the perfect and the wanted who had a right to live. She herself grew up in a world and an environment in which a black girl was perhaps not everyone's idea of the "perfect" or the "wanted". However, she went to a segregated school in East Texas, broke down barriers that not everyone wanted broken down, and was a bold and compelling spokeswoman for an unpopular cause. She understood that it

is not for the strong, the powerful, the eloquent, the born to choose life for the weak, the oppressed, the voiceless, the unborn.

Abortion was a civil rights issue for Dr Jefferson. With comparatively large proportions of abortions happening to African-American children, she pointed out that "more Americans of African descent have died in the abortion chambers than have died in all the years of slavery and lynchings." (<http://the-american-catholic.com/2010/10/18/mildred-fay-jefferson-requiescant-in-pace/>) Abortion did not only victimize children as a group, it also specifically victimized children conceived into already vulnerable and marginalized families.

She recruited youth to the cause, [saying](#), "If I had my way, there would be a pro-life group on every college campus here in the United States and in its territories.... I hope that wherever you [students] have a department of women's studies or black studies that you will have a corresponding pro-life movement." It seems a striking irony that while women like Dr Jefferson encouraged students to organize into pro-life clubs, such clubs are currently being shut down, de-funded, and harassed by universities and student unions for being "discriminatory" against women.

Dr Jefferson was noted by those who knew her as a powerful speaker and motivator. As a doctor, a woman, and an African-American she possessed the credibility to speak on many aspects of the abortion movement that perhaps some others could not. This is a reminder that we cannot merely turn up to vote for pro-life politicians in order to effect change, for, despite their often courageous and laudable efforts, politicians are not always the best equipped or the most poignant messengers to speak truth to a sceptical culture. Her message could resonate with all; she "spoke to young, to old, to all religions, to all races, to all people," a colleague [remembers](#).

"Decide what you want to do most and then set out to do it." This was Mildred Jefferson's motto and it led her to many successes. But she never forgot that success was not about achieving a selfish personal goal whatever the cost; rather, she showed that we must consider the lives of those that are weakest, most vulnerable and most persecuted in our midst.

What better [epitaph](#) could there be for this heroine of life and human dignity than her own words: "I am at once a physician, a citizen, and a woman, and I am not willing to stand aside and allow the concept of expendable human lives to turn this great land of ours into just another exclusive reservation where only the perfect, the privileged, and the planned have the right to live."

Dr Mildred Jefferson, 1926-2010.

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Leslie Kaufmann · 12 weeks ago

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I would like to thank Rebekah Hebbert for introducing me to Dr. Jefferson. What an eloquent model the doctor is for our young people! God give us all courage like hers. We're going to need it.

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Juan R. Velez · 12 weeks ago

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It is inspiring to learn about a courageous physicians like Dr. Jefferson. I will share this with some young medical students (some of them women) who feel the pressure to compromise their respect for the unborn.

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Guest · 12 weeks ago

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Dr Jefferson certainly was a most wonderful human being and valued all human life.

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Susan Moore, Sydney · 12 weeks ago

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Thank you, Mercator. Like most or all of your readers, I had never heard of this great woman--despite my own Harvard background (MAT, Ed School, '62) and my husband's (PhD, Theoretical Physics, Henry Ehrenreich's first doctoral student, '66). The Harvard Club in Sydney is business oriented, and doesn't publish material like this. I shall forward this piece to them.

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Tmc Palliative Care · 12 weeks ago

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Thank you Mercator Net for featuring the heroine of human dignity, Dr. Mildred Fay Jefferson. May we in the health care profession and in the academe always use our position to defend the sanctity of every human life, from conception to natural death, as well as the sanctity of marriage and the family. May we be true to the Hippocratic oath. May we always do good and avoid harm, avoid evil, in every doctor-patient encounter.

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Catherine Nakanwagi · 12 weeks ago

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Wow, amazing woman! We need that courage to stand up for many other things that society deems right and are not.

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Ben · 12 weeks ago

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What a courageous and amazing doctor ! Ill share this with my kids, who are doctors !

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mjm · 12 weeks ago

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I thank all involved for the wonderful article. I heard Dr. Jefferson debate in Boston and she was classy, sharp, uncompromising and charming. I am sorry to hear of her passing.

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Joanann Ilozumba · 12 weeks ago

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Dear mercator, you are really doing a good job opening our eyes to things we would never have thought of with your articles. I have never heard of Dr Jefferson until now and am glad i did and will share this piece of information with my friends. Thanks!

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William Mutebi · 11 weeks ago

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Great people are never selfish. Selfishness breeds disharmony, just like the pro abortion legislators are. Think about them not being born but being aborted then. Great article.

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Theresa W. Njuguna · 10 weeks ago

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I am grateful to know that such doctors exist. We need more like Dr. Jefferson who defend life and medical profession

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