

February 2026 Edition

# HRC NEWSLETTER

Brought to you by the CWA 7250 Human Rights Committee



**BLACK**  
HISTORY MONTH

## In This Issue:

- ◇ Henrietta Lacks
- ◇ Welfare
- ◇ Standing on the Right Side of History
- ◇ Get to know your HRC members

## Welcome

By: Lori Wolf

The CWA Local 7250 Human Rights Committee (HRC) is proud to bring you a new space dedicated to listening, learning, and advocating for fairness, dignity, and respect in our workplace. The committee exists to help ensure that every voice matters and that concerns related to equity, inclusion, accessibility, and basic human rights are acknowledged and addressed. At its core, our Human Rights

Committee works to identify issues that may impact our employees, raise awareness around those concerns, and help foster a culture where people feel safe, supported, and valued.

Our committee focuses on education, advocacy, and connection. This may include sharing information about workers' rights, highlighting resources available to employees, discussing real-world issues that affect our coworkers, and encouraging respectful dialogue around challenging topics. While we may not always have immediate solutions, our goal is to create visibility, open communication, and meaningful pathways for change. We believe that progress starts by listening, and that small, consistent efforts can lead to lasting impact.

To keep everyone informed, we plan to publish a Human Rights Committee newsletter every other month, featuring updates, topics of interest, and opportunities to get involved. We strongly encourage you to share your ideas, concerns, or interest in participating by using the CWA suggestion box located in the break room or by reaching out to any of our members. Whether you have a topic you'd like us to cover, a concern you'd like to raise, or simply want to lend your voice, your input matters. This committee is for all of us, and we look forward to building it together.

# Henrietta Lacks

By: Ian Thielke



Henrietta Lacks was born on August 1, 1920, in Roanoke, Virginia. At four years old, her mother passed away, and Henrietta was sent to live with her grandfather in a log cabin that was once the slave quarters on a white ancestor's plantation. At age 14, Henrietta became a mother for the first time giving birth to a son. She would go on to raise five children along with her husband David, eventually moving their family to Maryland.

In 1951 Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore was one of the only hospitals that would treat Black patients. Mrs. Lacks was seen by Dr. Howard Jones in February complaining of abdominal pain and bleeding. He quickly diagnosed her with cervical cancer and suggested radiation treatments. In the months that followed, doctors removed two cervical samples without Henrietta's knowledge. Meanwhile her severe pain persisted, and she returned to the hospital in August seeking relief. After she passed away on October 4, a partial autopsy indicated that the cancer had spread throughout her body. Henrietta Lacks was buried in an unmarked grave at her childhood home in Virginia.

Upon examining the sample of cells taken from Mrs. Lacks' tumor in a laboratory, researcher Dr. George Otto Gey noted the cells were far more durable than all the other cells he and his fellow scientists had examined in their careers. Prior to the sample taken from Henrietta Lacks (nicknamed "HeLa" cells), ordinary cells would only survive for a few days.

When news of the unusual HeLa cells began to reach far and wide, demand for a tiny piece of the sample grew and in 1995 scientists would clone HeLa cells to make them more widely available. That same year, Dr Jonas Saulk used the HeLa strain to develop a vaccine for polio.

Since then, more than 10,000 patents have been registered using HeLa cells including the COVID-19 vaccines. In 1998 the British Broadcasting Corporation featured a documentary about Mrs. Lacks and the cells that changed the planet. In 2010, Morehouse professor Dr. Roland Pattillo donated a headstone for Lacks' unmarked grave. Author Rebecca Skloot wrote a book called *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and in 2017, HBO announced that book would be adapted to become a film by the same name starring Oprah Winfrey as Henrietta's daughter, Deborah.

Following a 2021 lawsuit filed by Lacks' estate accusing Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc. of selling Mrs. Lacks' cells without her knowledge or consent, a confidential settlement was reached on August 1, 2023 Henrietta's 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday. In 2024, it was announced that Johns Hopkins Medical would break ground on the construction of what would be named the Henrietta Lacks Building to be completed by 2027.

# Welfare

By: Hector Capote

A lot of people talk about welfare programs, but usually in a negative light. Most who hold that view have never been in a program but will always have negative stories to relate. I will share my personal story with you. I came to the USA from Cuba during the Mariel Boatlift. I was 7 years old, my two twin brothers were 5, and my little brother was 9 months old. My mom was 26 years old; she was a housewife, never had a job, and had only a junior high school education. My father was not allowed to leave Cuba. This was a dramatic experience for my whole family. That lasted 6 long years with a lot of expense and even more paperwork.

In the USA, we had my dad's family, and my mom knew a few of them because they had left Cuba in the 1960's. After a stay at my aunt's house, we moved to Hialeah, a city near Miami, where most refugees like us began their lives in the USA. It was section 8 housing, but we had a

park in front of us, which was a wonderland for us. Since my mom had young kids, a regular job was not possible, and even though my brothers and I got our resident cards, my mom didn't get hers until 6 years later. My uncle Jorge, who brought us and later our dad out of Cuba, signed us up for discounts for the poor on our electric and telephone bills, and we got food stamps, too. My clothes were from my cousins from the 70's. My mom did get a job as a babysitter under the table, as they say. She took care of a teenager with Down syndrome and two babies, one of whom was my cousin. I did not know we were poor at the time but it was way better than life in Cuba. My mom was making like \$80 a month in the 1980s. I did not grow up wearing the latest fashion; my shoes were from Payless Shoes. I remember when I started JR High, I had just 3 pairs of jeans and like 2-3 shirts. When I did get another, the kids gathered around and laughed and sang Capote got a new shirt. I was teased and harassed by the bully for being poor. In 1986, my dad was finally allowed to leave Cuba. My dad got a job right away with his brother's painting company and announced we are off welfare. And eventually buying a house in 1994 and achieving the American Dream. Welfare saved our lives during those 6 yrs of a new life in a different country and culture.

**We're living in a time when being simple or silent is no longer an option, from getting your feet wet meant they are now frost bitten. A time when politics rule the land, but no human is let to stand.**

**They say this is the great America right! But no one can fit their image neither black nor white nor any. So where do we stand, well as long as it's not on their land. Because they claim to not have stolen this land, but with broken treaties it has exchanged hands. Hell no, we won't go its Ice whose gotta go. Get on back to that low place you call home.**

**F\*\*\* Ice**

**-Poem by Jon Schaab**

# Standing on the Right Side of History

By: Lori Wolf

Lately, many of us are carrying heavy emotions, anger, fear for the future, heartbreak, and exhaustion. For a long time, I felt powerless under that weight. Like many members, I was busy surviving, working, parenting, studying, and trying to keep my head above water. What was happening around us felt overwhelming, and it was easy to tell myself that it was “political” and therefore something I could set aside.

That changed after the murder of Renee Good.

What I have come to understand is what we are witnessing right now in our city and across the country is not a political issue. This is a human rights issue. Regardless of where we fall politically, this is about humanity. It is about dignity, safety, and the value of human life.

For a long time, I told myself I was too busy to engage. Since that horrific day, I’ve taken small actions when I could, but like so many of us, survival still came first.

Then, at our last membership meeting, something was said that shook me. A member defended ICE and made his opinion known that our union should not support any of the protests opposing ICE. His words angered me and provoked me enough to speak up when I normally would remain silent. I can’t tell you exactly what I said. I’m fairly sure I blacked out (public speaking is not usually my thing), but it came from a place of deep conviction. It came from the belief that when human

rights are being violated, silence is not neutrality. It is complicity.

Once the intense emotions subsided, I started to ask

questions. My biggest question was why people are so polarized by politics? What this moment made clear to me is how many good people, people with good intentions, are taught to trust politicians, talking points, and headlines over their own eyes. Over eyewitnesses, over video, over their own lived experience.

This isn’t about party lines. It’s about whether we recognize harm when we see it. We are often told these are “unprecedented times.” They are not.

Let’s take a brief walk down history... Martin Luther King Jr. was called a radical and a threat. Harriet Tubman was hunted as a criminal. Nelson Mandela was labeled a terrorist and imprisoned for 27 years. History later called them heroes.

We must now ask ourselves, what will history say about Renee Good, about Alex Parretti, and all the community members who are standing up together and saying, “this is not right?”

Unions, ours included, were born out of struggle with people choosing solidarity over fear, and humanity over division. That legacy did not disappear. When we stand for human rights, we are honoring the very foundation of the labor movement. We are strongest when we stand together.

This is not a democratic or republican issue. This is a Humanity issue. Every living person on this earth has the right to be treated with dignity, compassion, and respect. I am not asking you to change your political views. I am asking you to remember the immigrants (whether legal or not), the protesters, the witnesses, the children and bystanders, they are all HUMAN, and deserve to be treated as such, with dignity, compassion, and respect. (cont. pg. 5)





(cont. from pg. 5) Make no mistake brothers and sisters, history is being created right now. I would like you to consider one quote from the Diary of Ann Frank. It draws disturbing parallels to current events. "Terrible Things are Happening outside. Poor helpless people are being dragged out of their homes. Families are torn apart. Men, Women, and Children are separated. Children come home from school to find that their parents have disappeared." (Frank, 1995)

Now I ask you one last question, "what side of history do you choose to be on?"

#### Sources

Frank, A. (1995). *The diary of a young girl: The definitive edition*. (O. H. Frank & M. Pressler, Eds.; S. Massotty, Trans.). Doubleday.

## Get to know your HRC members

**Candice Burks-** I serve as Co-Lead of the Social Justice Ministry at High Praise Ministries, where I lead civic engagement efforts through Isaiah and Faith in Minnesota. In this role, I focus on building strong relationships, developing leaders, and leveraging collective power to advance equitable policies and bring vital resources to communities across Minnesota. My work centers on strengthening grassroots, organizing and supporting community-based solutions that build lasting political power.

As a mother of two, I am deeply committed to creating a more just and equitable future for the next generation. Through my involvement with the Human Rights Committee, I carry this same commitment into the workplace where my focus is advocating for dignity, fairness, and inclusive practices. I believe human rights begin where we work, and that meaningful change happens when equity is not only written into policy but practiced through everyday actions.

**Eddie Samuel:** I am a proud Caribbean American originally from the sunny isle of Antigua. I studied in New York for 4 long years before making Minnesota my home for more than 23 years. While I have deep roots in the Midwest, I have a special love for sunshine. I am especially fond of Orlando, Atlanta, and the energy of the South.

I am deeply passionate about social justice and committed to addressing and improving injustices wherever they appear, especially when it comes to standing up against bullies. I joined the Human Rights Committee because I

believe in doing my part to improve my surroundings and create a fairer and more supportive environment. I am driven by a genuine desire to help others and to be a voice for respect, dignity, and positive change in the workplace and beyond. With everything that is going on, now more than ever, I believe that an Injury to **ONE** is an Injury to **ALL**.

