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Illinois State Senator Jacqueline Collins Effects Change Through Faith and Action

by Julia Hanna

Growing up in segregation-era McComb, Mississippi, Jacqueline Collins MC/MPA 2001, S&L 2005 didn't so much learn lessons about equity and social justice, she lived them.

"I think we're all shaped by our generation, and my formation came during the 1960s," she says. "My major influences were John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."

Now as state senator representing a district on the south side of Chicago, Collins has been putting those lessons to good use, fighting for legislation aimed at helping those worst hit by the housing crisis and by predatory lending practices.

Collins first sought to work in public service through journalism. She reported on issues such as redlining, voter disenfranchisement, and housing discrimination. She was nominated for an Emmy for her work as an editor at CBS-TV in Chicago. But by the late 1990s she found journalism was changing.

"When I entered the field, journalism wasn't a sensational, celebrity-oriented profession," says Collins. "It was more investigative, more focused on creating an informed citizenry."

She had always been involved in the public sphere, though. Through her work with Chicago-based church groups, where she volunteered on campaigns including one against alcohol and tobacco advertisements targeting inner-city youth (a campaign that saw Chicago ban billboards for those products in the city), she was struck by the experience of effecting change through a combination of faith and action.

After some soul-searching, she left her television job in 1999 and applied to the Kennedy School's Mid-Career Program and to Harvard Divinity School, where she received a master's in theological studies in 2003.

Not long after completing those degrees, Collins was convinced by her pastor to return home and run for the Illinois State Senate. At the time, she was living in the home of John Kenneth Galbraith, the eminent Harvard economist, an experience Collins describes as "a great gift." After some reassurance that she would run as a Democrat, Galbraith, who passed away in 2006, and his wife, Kitty, hosted Collins's first fundraiser in their home.

Collins's legislative focus has centered on the same issues of equity and social justice that have always driven her. Fallout from sub-prime mortgage lending first became an issue in her district five years ago; since then, Collins, who serves as chair of the Senate Financial Institutions Committee, has worked to craft legislation that will bring some support to Illinois residents, including a recent bill to establish a three-month moratorium on mortgage foreclosures so that

homeowners will have the time to enter counseling and develop an alternative payment plan.

Despite the difficulties the financial crisis and the recent gubernatorial political scandal have wrought on her constituents in her home state, Collins sees reason for optimism and hope.

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Originally published in the Spring 2009 Harvard Kennedy School Magazine.



Jacqueline Collins. *photo Brandy Rees*

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— *Jacqueline Collins*

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