



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

2/21/03

Contacts:

Jon Newman
(804) 788-1414
Chris Black
(202) 393-1244

Bunnie Jackson Ransom
(404) 505-8188
bjr@fclassinc.com

Spelman College Cosby Endowed Professor Honored with Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities

Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon recognized for advancing and preserving the African-American experience of the 20th century

Washington, D.C., February 11, 2003 – A celebrated singer of early congregational and traditional gospel music, who raised her voice in song as a civil rights freedom singer, and who, as a scholar and educator, developed research and expositions that chronicled African-American culture, has been selected to receive this year's Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities. Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of the vocal group Sweet Honey In The Rock, composer of documentary film scores and a leading force in the Smithsonian Institution's work in African-American history, is among six distinguished Americans tapped for the \$250,000 awards, now in their ninth year.

"Dr. Reagon is a unique and particularly fitting recipient within this category in that her lifetime of work is notable within both the arts *and* the humanities," said Teresa Heinz, chairman of the

Heinz Family Foundation. “She has brought passion, intelligence and eloquence to her every endeavor, and our nation has been ennobled by her groundbreaking contributions. Through song and scholarship alike, she has proved herself an influential force, stirring the cause of civil rights and helping preserve the history and culture of African-Americans. She is a truly amazing woman, worthy of the admiration of all Americans.

Dr. Reagon’s childhood was shaped in a deeply religious family by church and school. Her music and spirituality were profoundly influenced by her Baptist minister father, and it was his congregations that stamped her musical language with the sounds of 18th and 19th century congregational singing. It was perhaps inevitable that she would form one of the most influential and dynamic internationally renowned *a cappella* ensembles. The repertoire of Sweet Honey In The Rock, an ensemble of African-American women singers, draws upon the twin foundations of Dr. Reagon’s experiences – her activism through song in the Civil Rights Movement and her commitment to sharing the historical legacy of the African-American struggle for freedom and justice in America.

Dr. Reagon became involved in the Civil Rights Movement in her hometown of Albany, Ga., and from there, as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), she traveled the country as a member of the SNCC Freedom Singers. Coming to the concert stage as a freedom singer provided a new definition of what art could be, and she has become a leading exponent of art as communal voice.

Sharing a small cell with up to 40 women during a brief stint in jail for her participation in an anti-segregation march, Dr. Reagon found singing to have dual benefits. “People did not necessarily change their positions through singing, but singing collectively created more space to be together in a cell with no space.” From that point forward, she became a leader, using song to combat bigotry and bolster the spirits of those engaged in the struggle.

From her initial participation with the SNCC Freedom Singers to her founding of Sweet Honey, Dr. Reagon’s inspired music was always more than just pleasing to the ear. She has blended her singing, composing and scholarship into her activism. Her work as a collaborator on

documentary film projects has helped to chronicle stories that reveal the courage and beauty of the legacy of struggle for change and transformation. A producer of many of Sweet Honey In The Rock's recordings, Dr. Reagon also has produced several documentary recordings, and her work as singer and authority of African-American sacred songs has been featured in the hour-long PBS film, *The Songs Are Free*.

Completing her Ph.D. in history at Howard University, Dr. Reagon early on committed herself to conducting primary research and analysis in African-American culture. At the same time, she sought out numerous ways to share those findings not only with the community of scholars but with the wider public. As the founding director of the Smithsonian Institution's Program in Black American Culture, she formed research teams of scholars. For more than two decades, Dr. Reagon played a major role in deepening and expanding the museum's holdings in this area, all the while organizing countless conferences, public presentations and publications focused on the preservation and dissemination of African-American culture. Among her signature accomplishments were her oral history documentation of the culture of the Civil Rights Movement and the production of the Peabody Award-winning series, *Wade in the Water: African-American Sacred Music Traditions*, produced by National Public Radio and the Smithsonian.

"I do believe that singing creates energy and is transformative, and forming communities through song really does provide a way to reach beyond the boundaries that separate," Dr. Reagon said. "I am deeply moved and honored that the Heinz Family Foundation has found in my life and work meaning that strikes a chord with the chorus they create through these very special tributes. I joined the struggle against bigotry and hatred as a way of creating who I could be. I cared intensely about being accountable for the quality of the community in which I lived. If things were wrong, then I had a life I could offer to change them. I discovered that the language through which I could speak the clearest was through singing songs that had been passed to me as well as new songs that chronicle the times through which we move. That has been the sweetest blessing."

The Heinz Family Foundation of Pittsburgh annually recognizes individuals whose perseverance and sacrifice represent the best of the human spirit – qualities that Senator Heinz himself held so dear. By category, the other recipients of the Heinz Awards are:

- **Environment (shared): Mario J. Molina**, Ph.D., chemist and professor of environmental sciences, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and **John D. Spengler**, Ph.D., professor and director, environmental sciences and engineering program, Harvard University.
- **Human Condition: Paul Farmer**, M.D., Ph.D., physician and medical anthropologist, Harvard University, and founder, Partners In Health.
- **Public Policy: Geraldine Jensen**, founder and president, the Association for Children for Enforcement of Support (ACES).
- **Technology, the Economy and Employment: Paul B. MacCready**, Ph.D., inventor, engineer and chairman, AeroVironment, Inc.

* * *

About the Heinz Foundation

The Heinz Family Foundation, one of the Heinz Family Philanthropies, began as a charitable trust established by the late Senator Heinz in 1984. His widow, Teresa Heinz, created the Heinz Awards in 1993. The Awards are the primary activity of the Foundation. In addition to the Heinz Awards, the Foundation directs a grant-making program that is active in a wide range of issues, principally those concerning the environment and conservation, women, human services, education and the arts – areas in which the late Senator was most active.

Nominations for the Heinz Awards are submitted by an invited Council of Nominators, all experts in their fields, who serve anonymously. Nominees are reviewed by five panels of 10 jurors each appointed by the Foundation. Award recipients are selected by the Board of Directors for the Heinz Awards upon review of the jurors' recommendations.

Past winners of the Heinz Awards include former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan; poet Rita Dove; Dean Kamen, inventor and founder of student robotics competition U.S. FIRST; Love Canal activist Lois Gibbs; Dr. Anita Borg, president of the Institute for Women and Technology; nuclear arms expert General George Lee Butler (USAF, retired); and Dudley Cocke, director of Appalachia's Roadside Theater.

In addition to the \$250,000 award for their unrestricted use, recipients are given a medallion inscribed with the image of Senator Heinz. On its reverse side is an image of a globe passing between two hands, symbolizing partnership, continuity and values carried on to the next generation. The hands also suggest passing on the stewardship of the earth to the next generation. John Heinz IV, the late Senator's oldest son, designed the medallion.

Heinz Award winners will receive their awards at a private ceremony in Washington, D.C.

For more information, visit the web at www.heinzawards.net.

#