

Henry Hampton Tribute

Excerpts from A Tribute to Henry Hampton | Presented at the 37th Annual Council on Foundation Film and Video Festival
By Andrea L. Taylor

Henry Hampton (1940-1998) was one of the most influential documentary filmmakers in the 20th century. His work chronicled America's great political and social movements and set new standards for broadcast quality. Blackside, Inc., the independent film and television company he founded in 1968, completed 60 major films and media projects that amplified the voices of the poor and disenfranchised.

During a remarkable career, Hampton's vision of a just and compassionate future for all Americans never faltered. His work celebrated the resilience and nobility of the human spirit in the face of adversity and appealed to audiences throughout the world. Despite challenges in his own life, he exhibited great courage by overcoming the effects of polio at an early age and in a battle against cancer in later years. He never allowed physical disabilities or racial identity to restrict his ambition.

Recognition for his outstanding work include a designation in 1990 from the President as one of five Americans who had made outstanding contributions to the humanities, the Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities, and 14 honorary degrees. His enduring legacy is the legion of filmmakers that were led, trained, and inspired by his commitment to excellence. Their work continues to influence the field in the 21st century.

Hampton grew up in St. Louis, graduated from Washington University, and dropped out of medical school. He went to work for the Unitarian Universalist Church as the director of information, traveling extensively in the United States and abroad and making his first visit to the Deep South for the Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, March led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His participation in that event was the inspiration for Eyes on the Prize, as well as for storytelling about what he called "messy history" that dealt with difficult and divisive issues. Although he chose not to become a surgeon like his father, Hampton's life was dedicated to healing with truth and using the power of media to help the nation learn the lessons of history and to envision a brave new world.