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Detroit's book shows determined man

As Michigan faces some tough economic times ahead, it's comforting to look at the past and take heart. Michiganders are nothing if not hopeful and determined.

That's the overriding theme of the children's chapter book, "Who's Jim Hines?" (Wayne State University Press, \$12.95). It's a book about a black family in Detroit in the 1920s and '30s. But it's also the story of the triumph of hope over fear, of dreams over hard realities.

Written by Detroit's Jean Elster and selected as a 2009 Michigan Notable Book, "Who's Jim Hines?" is based on the life of Douglas Ford Sr., a proud entrepreneur at a time when few opportunities were open to a man of color. He was also Elster's grandfather.

"He had been a chauffeur and a cook in New Orleans," said Elster, who writes grants when she's not writing books. "He came to Detroit, but he wasn't coming to work in the auto factories. He had a different mindset; he wanted to be self-employed."

Ford noticed that the local factories needed someone to recycle the wooden packing crates that held auto supplies. His neighbors needed firewood. So he reclaimed the wooden crates and started the Douglas Ford Wood Co.

Pride in the face of poverty

Elster does a great job in her book of reviving the neighborhoods of old Detroit, where African Americans and Eastern Europeans mingled in what is now Detroit's North End. There were only a few black families on Halleck Street where Ford raised his four children.

"I grew up never knowing the word for head scarf," said Elster. "I thought it was 'babushka' because that's the word my grandmother always used. My grandparents had the only phone in the neighborhood and everyone, white or black, came by to use it."

What comes through powerfully in "Who's Jim Hines?" is the vision and pride that Ford maintained even in the face of daunting obstacles like racism and poverty.

His son, Douglas Ford Jr., was the oldest. As the only boy, he wanted nothing more than to be like his father. He thought he had reached his highest heights the day he got to ride along in his father's truck.

But Ford Sr. had bigger dreams. He would never let his son use the donkey saw to cut the wood -- his boy was going to be a doctor someday and would need a perfect set of hands.

I'm not sure how a man who is sandwiched between Jim Crow and union politics (he never was allowed to join the Teamsters) had the gall to imagine his son would one day be a doctor. But he did; and it happened.

Ford Jr. graduated from Meharry Medical College in Tennessee in 1951. He practiced medicine in

Montclair, N.J.

In the end, Ford Sr. was like so many people of all backgrounds who migrated to Detroit to make a better life.

"I think the message is: Don't be discouraged," said Elster. "There are always things you can do to make it. Look at your talents and skills. Look at the needs of your neighbors and make a living serving your community."

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Additional Facts

Jean Elster

Signing "Who's Jim Hines?"

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Barnes & Noble

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