

Pauli Murray: Perseverance & Power ^[1]

Murray, Pauli

Individual perseverance and community power

By Sarajane Davis and Kelly Agan, N.C.Government & Heritage Library, 2020

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November 20, 1910- July 1, 1985

"What is often called exceptional ability is nothing more than persistent endeavor." -- Pauli Murray



Photograph of the Pauli Murray mural on Foster Street in Durham, NC with members of a human rights activism class at Duke University, taken Fall of 2009. By Robin Kirk, Flickr.

Can you think of a time when you had to try many times to achieve something you wanted?

If so, you may share something in common with activist, lawyer, poet and writer Pauli Murray. Dr. Murray was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1910 as Anna Pauline Murray. When she was three years old, she moved to Durham to live with her aunts after her mother died. In high school, she participated in student government and played basketball. In 1925, she graduated at the top of her class from Durham's Hillside High School. Hillside was one of Durham's all-black segregated schools during the time of segregation.

Pauli Murray didn't let injustice stop her

Some people mistreated Dr. Murray because of her gender, race, and economic background. But she refused to give up. After high school, she hoped to attend Columbia University in New York City. The school would not allow her to attend because she was a woman. So she took extra classes and enrolled at nearby Hunter College. A few years later she wanted to move closer to home. She applied to the University of North Carolina Graduate School. They denied her admission because she was African American.



Photograph of the NC Historical Highway Marker dedicated to Pauli Murray. The marker is located in Durham, NC at West Chapel Hill and Carroll Streets, near Murray's childhood home. It was dedicated in 2010.

[3] She asked the N.A.A.C.P. to launch a lawsuit against the state, but the group did not take her case. Thurgood Marshall encouraged her to apply to Howard University's law school. Once there, Pauli Murray was the only woman in the program. She stunned her classmates and many on the faculty when she once again graduated at the top of her class. She spent the rest of her life fighting racial and gender discrimination. Dr. Murray is also known for starting important conversations about gender identity.

Dr. Murray's important contributions to human rights

Dr. Murray's ideas and writing were used by other lawyers to help end legal discrimination. She wrote an important book called *States' Laws on Race and Color*. It studied segregation laws across the country. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall called it "the bible of the civil rights movement." And two Supreme Court justices used Murray's ideas to help fight discrimination when they were lawyers. Can you guess who they were? Thurgood Marshall and Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Pauli Murray also helped create the National Organization for Women in 1966.

Pauli Murray went on to be a college professor of law and African American and women's studies. And in 1961, President John F. Kennedy appointed her to the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. When she was in her sixties, she became an Episcopal priest. In 1977 she became the first black woman ordained as an Episcopal priest.

Dr. Murray's life shows us how individual perseverance can lead to much bigger social change. Pauli Murray worked persistently for what she believed in. But for a long time many people did not know who she was and how important she was to the movements for social, racial and gender rights in the 20th century. In 2010, the State of North Carolina placed an historical marker near her childhood home in Durham to honor her. And her childhood home in Durham has been designated as a National Treasure and a National Historic Landmark.

What can you and your peers do to make sure you treat people in your class, school, and community as equals?

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Kirk, Robin. "Human Rights Activism Class." Photograph. [Fall 2009]. Flickr. Creative Commons CC BY 2.0. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/rightsatduke/4172757560> [9] (accessed January 21, 2020)

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