
Women And Their Role In The Civil Rights Movement

The movie that plays in our minds when we think of the Civil Rights movement is one starring Martin Luther King Jr giving powerful speeches and inspiring both the Black and White populations to carry the banner for social freedom. Although Martin Luthger King Jr was a driving force in the movement, there were so many others who bore the weight of the cause who did not draw as much attention to themselves. There were countless groups dedicated to fighting the social injustice of racial discrimination like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the sudentes for a democratic society, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Congress of Racial Equality just to name a few. During the 1960s, women, along with people of color, were still facing many forms of discrimination and were often overlooked further concluding that the women involved in the Civil Rights Movement, both black and white, had to fight harder since they were already at a disadvantage.

Ruby Hurley, also known as the “Queen of Civil Rights”, was one of the most influential women who participated in the movement, heince her nickname. She is mostly recognized for her work with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and advocating strongly for non-violent legislation that promoted equality for all. After Hurley completed college, she was employed by the federal government for a short time, and then she began working for an African American owned financial institution called the Industrial Bank of Washington. At the time that she was working for the bank, she also attended evening law courses at Robert H. Terrell Law School. Despite the fact that she did not earn a degree in Law, she acquired an understanding and many skills pertaining to the legislative process, further aiding her work with the NAACP. Being raised in Washington D.C., Hurley was not accustomed to the level of segregation and strength of the Jim Crow laws that was prevalent in the south. When her duties with the NAACP brought her to Birmingham, Alabamama she was challenged with oftentimes fearing for her life and not just her place in society. In the book, My Soul is Rested, Hurley shares the following:

At that point, I was just about sick of civil rights and sick of fighting the white folks and sick of the south and I said “I've had it.” Because every time I picked up the telephone it was a threatening call, and when I'd go home, I never knew weather it was going to be bomb. I had gotten down in weight; with my height I weighed about one hundred fifteen pounds. I couldn't eat, and days I'd go without food because I just could not eat in Jim Crow places. The only place I could get to alot of places to fight for civil rights was by the bus, and the bus stops, the places to eat were all segregated, and I was not going to eat in a segregated place. . . This was segregation. This was what existed in the South. And I listen to young folks nowadays talking about old folks “taking it.’ They don't know how we didnt take it. There were those who died rather than take it. (135)

After moving to the south, Hurley was given the title of Regional Secretary and then Director of the southeast Regional branch of the NAACP. Under Hurley's care and supervision, this branch of the NAACP would become the group with the most members, skyrocketing over 90,000 by the end of the 1960s. Ruby Hurley contributed 39 years of her life to the NAACP and was one of only a few women to rise to the top of the organization defying the social expectations of women. After her death in 1980, Hurley left a blazing legacy of passion and endurance while

she fought for Civil Rights.

Sheyann Webb entered the fight as a young child at the age of eight. As she was on her way to school one January morning, she passed a meeting at the Brown Chapel AME Church and felt the pull to join. She entered the church, settled into a pew and listened to Hosea Williams say the words "If you can't vote, then you're not free; and if you ain't free, children, then you're a slave." these few words led her to participate in the movement with everything she had. Soon she was attending meetings, rallies and marches instead of school and leading the congregation in freedom songs. Webb reflects in *My Soul is Rested* by saying, "Every time he came around, I used to sit on his lap in the pulpit and lead a favorite tune of his, "Aint gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around." and everytime hed come and get ready to leave, hed say, "Sheyann, What do you want?" I'd say, "freedom."(204) Sheyann's one birthday wish was that her parents would register to vote, despite their disapproval of her actions with the civil rights movement. Soon after making her request, her mother told her, "Shey, you're getting your birthday present a day early." Sheyann walked between her parents and held their hands as they merged into long line to register. White passersby sprayed Raid and disinfectant at them in hopes to deter them from waiting any longer. The courthouse closed before they even reached the doors but their minds were made up. Her parents eventually did both register to vote and so did Sheyann on her 18th birthday.

Vivian Malone Jones left her mark on history by becoming the first African American to graduate from the formerly segregated University of Alabama. She was only one of the first two African American students at the University in the year 1963. Even though Jones was an exceptional high school student and member of the National Honor Society, she was one of several Black students to have her application unfairly rejected from UA because of things like "class size" and "enrollment" problems. But this did not put a damper on her educational goals because she went on to earn a bachelor's degree at Alabama A&M, which was a mostly black university. Unfortunately for Jones and conveniently for anti-civil rights supporters, the school lost its accreditation. In hopes to earn an accredited degree, she applied to the University of Alabama's School of Commerce and Business Administration. Joining forces with another African American student, James Hood, Vivian Jones and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed suit against UA for denying entry to Black students on the basis of race. At first the odds were in their favor when a district judge ruled in favor of the them entering the university but this development was blocked by the then-governor George Wallace in the famous "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door" event. Govenor Wallace stood his ground on his promise to uphold segregation in the state, coining the now infamous slogan of "Segregation Now, Segregation Forever." it was only after federalized guard troops arrived to intimidate, four and a half hours after Govenor Wallace's refusal, were both James Hood and Vivian Jones admitted to the University. Vivian Malone Jones states in *My Soul is Rested*, "But the University of Alabama had a reasonable fee, it had the major that I was interested in, and here they were telling me, a citizen of Alabama, that the only reason that I couldn't attend was because I happened to be black. It was absolutely ridiculous."(332-333) In november of 1963, there were three bomb blasts at the University of Alabama, with one just four blocks from Vivian Malone Jones' dormitory. She said in an interview, "I decided not to show any fear and went to classes that day." With concern for her wellbeing, the university hired a driver for her, a student named Mack Jones. The two eventually fell in love and got married. After Vivian finally graduated and earned her degree from Alabama, she worked for the United States Justice Department in its civil rights division. In addition to this job, she also worked at the Environmental Protection Agency as director of civil rights and urban affairs as well as director of environmental justice

before finally retiring with a full career behind her in 1996. In the same year that Jones retired, former Governor Wallace presented the Lurleen B. Wallace Award for Courage, which he named for his late wife, to Vivian Jones. He told her that he had made a mistake 33 years earlier concerning her entrance to the university and that he admired her. This interaction between the two ultimately led to the discussion of forgiveness.

Lastly, I will mention a woman who endured much at the hands of racial injustice and who ultimately impacted the financial status of many african americans in a very positive way. Fannie Lou Hamer was born in Mississippi to sharecroppers Lou Ella and James Townsend. She was brought up in a devastating level of poverty, and at the young age of six was made to join her family picking cotton. When she was twelve, she had to leave school completely to work. Fannie grew up and married and continued to live and work on a plantation. In the year 1961, Hamer received a hysterectomy by a white doctor without her consent or knowledge while undergoing just a simple surgery to remove a uterine tumor. This horrific act of forced sterilization of black women, as an attempt to reduce the black population, was such a prevalent practice that it was named a "Mississippi Appendectomy." Now that the couple was unable to have children of their own, they adopted two daughters. Within the same year, Fannie became involved with the civil rights movement. She became a SNCC organizer and on August 31, 1962 led 17 volunteers to register to vote at the Indianola, Mississippi Courthouse. When the group unfairly denied the right to vote due to a literacy test designed for them to fail, they were harassed on their way home, when police stopped their bus and fined them \$100 for the charge that the bus was "too yellow". The next year, after she'd successfully registered to vote, Fannie and a few other black women were arrested for sitting in a "whites-only" bus station restaurant. They were taken to the jailhouse, where she and several fo the other women were violently beaten, leaving Fannie with lifelong injuries. Despite all of her physical setbacks, in the year 1964, Fannie's national reputation shot up as she co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. That year, Hamer and other MFDP members went to the Democratic National Convention and pushed to be recognized as the official delegation. Hamer spoke before the Credentials Committee, calling for mandatory integrated state delegations. President Lyndon Johnson was not a fan of the things that Fannie had to say so he held a televised press conference so she would not get any television air time. But her speech, filled with its detailed and aggressive descriptions of the racial prejudice in the South, was televised later reaching many ears, despite the Presidents efforts. Rightfully frustrated by the political process, she transitioned to an economic approach to racial equality. This took te form of a "pig bank," which would provide free pigs for black farmers to breed, raise, and slaughter. After this she created the Freedom Farm Cooperative, which served to buy up land that blacks could own and farm with the help of one another. Fannie Lou Hamer purchased 640 acres, launched a coop store, boutique, and sewing enterprise while single-handedly ensuring that 200 units of low-income housing were built to help african americans gain financial stability.