

PAULI MURRAY

THE LIFE OF A PIONEERING FEMINIST AND CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

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Pauli Murray was a thorn on the side of white America [of Franklin Roosevelt and subsequent presidents] demanding justice and equal treatment for all. She was a civil rights and women’s rights activist before any movement advocated for either—the brilliant mind that, in 1944, conceptualized the arguments that would win *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas*, and in 1964, the arguments that won women equality in the workplace. Throughout her life, she fought for the oppressed, not only through changing laws, but by using her powerful prose to influence those who could effect change. She lived by her convictions and challenged authority to demand fairness and justice regardless of the personal consequences. Without seeking acknowledgement, glory, or financial gain for what she did, Pauli Murray fought in the trenches for many of the rights we take for granted. Her goal was human rights and the dignity of life for all.

AN ACTIVIST IN THE MAKING

As a child, Pauli Murray lived in the South, a place ruled by Jim Crow laws—the laws enacted by white men after the Emancipation proclamation and the Civil Rights Amendments prohibited slavery and gave Black men the right to vote. Jim Crow laws were meant to keep Blacks away from whites and in a subordinate position—less than in every way. Pauli Murray was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1910, but her mother died when she was three. At that time, Pauli Murray went to live with her aunt Pauline Dame, her aunt Sallie Fitzgerald, and her grandparents, Robert and Cornelia Fitzgerald in Durham, North Carolina. In the Fitzgerald household, a household full of teachers, Pauli Murray was brought up with an understanding of her own worth, and with the ability to make her own decisions, even as a child. She had an innate sense of fairness.

Have your students research Jim Crow laws and discuss how they would feel had they been subjected to those laws.

JUSTICE THEN, JUSTICE NOW

Pauli Murray knew a neighborhood boy who was shot by a white man for crossing a corner of that white man's field—the man was not arrested, much less tried. An orderly in an asylum beat her father to death. The man was arrested and tried, but given only ten years in prison for killing another man. Consider with your students how such an upbringing might have influenced the life choices Pauli Murray made. Discuss with your students how violence against Black people—men in particular—still continues. Discuss the outcomes of recent cases of alleged police brutality and address whether there is a noticeable change in the direction of justice.

HUNTER COLLEGE

Pauli Murray decided at a very young age that she did not want to stay in the South. She did not want to have to put up with Jim Crow laws anymore. She decided to attend Hunter College in New York. Even though she had graduated from a Black, North Carolina high school, however, Pauli Murray did not have enough courses to enter Hunter College. Black students were only allowed to attend eleven years before graduating in North Carolina while white students went for the full twelve years. Discuss with your students what they could do to make up that deficit. Compare it to what Pauli Murray did.

A SHARECROPPER'S LIFE IN THE BALANCE

At the beginning of her activism, Pauli Murray was involved with the Odell Waller case. It was a case in which a Black man shot a white man in self-defense. But the Black man was sentenced to die. The U.S. Constitution has always guaranteed the right to be tried by a jury of your peers, but there was not a black face in the jury that tried Odell Waller. Have your students research the poll tax. Compare the cost of paying the poll tax to an average weekly wage. Discuss the poll taxes effects not only on jury selection and the chance that a person of color could receive a fair trial, but also on the inability to have persons of color elected to offices who could then change the laws that kept them subordinated to whites.

MORE THAN THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

As a child, Pauli Murray thought that Jim Crow laws were unfair, and she tried to avoid the situations which would make her have to obey them. She tried to run away to New York, but Jim Crow's claws still grabbed her. The only way to get away from Jim Crow was to change the laws. She had to become a lawyer. Use the graph "It took more than the emancipation proclamation" from xxxx. to discuss with your class the evolution of race laws in our country.

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL

The key to Jim Crow laws was the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Homer Plessy, a man 7/8 white refused to move to the segregated car of a train. The NAACP had hoped that this case would topple Jim Crow. Instead, it firmly placed it as the law of the land. *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruled that segregation between the races was legal so long as the facilities or services provided were equal. That ruling became known as “separate but equal.”

Discuss with your students how *Plessy v. Ferguson* could have been decided. The intent of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—the Civil Rights Amendments—clearly was to end slavery and discrimination. There is no way that something which is separate—different—can be equal, still the members of the Supreme Court couldn’t see that in 1896, when the case was brought. Have students research the make up of the Court that decided *Plessy v. Ferguson*. What in their background and upbringing may have made them make the decision they made?

LAUGHINGSTOCK

The NAACP looked for cases that would dismantle Jim Crow by trying to prove that facilities, or buildings, or services were not equal. Pauli Murray believed that trying to dismantle Jim Crow by fighting for individual buildings or services was a never-ending battle—one which would never be won. Discuss with your students why she would believe that.

Pauli Murray knew that the Fourteenth Amendment—the one that guarantees equal protection under the law—already prohibited separate but equal. Everyone must be treated equally. Still, when she proposed that, in 1944, her professor and her classmates laughed at her. Ten years later that same professor used Pauli Murray’s idea and Pauli Murray’s paper to win the landmark case that toppled Jim Crow—*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Her professor and other members of the NAACP not only used her idea, but they used her papers in the court briefs. But they never told her. She never got credit. Discuss gender equity in the work place at that time with your students. Discuss with them why the men laughed at her. Why did they not give her credit?

THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Pauli Murray was asked to be a member of President John F. Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women. That commission developed a very comprehensive report and had many recommendations. Have your students research President Kennedy’s mandate to the commission and compare it to the commission’s report. Discuss the motivations of both the President and the women members of the commission. Unfortunately, the Commission’s report was delivered a couple of weeks before President Kennedy was assassinated. Have your students research what advancements, if any, took place because of the commission’s work. Discuss with your students what might have happened if President Kennedy had not been killed.

THE 1964 CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

As a result of the President's Commission on the Status of Women, a network of women formed—capable, intelligent women. Many held positions in the government. Since there was no e-mail then, they wrote letters telling each other of opportunities and problems. With her habit of writing letters for everything, Pauli Murray was at the apex of that network. She was one of the forces that kept the members together.

In 1964, Representative Howard Smith of Virginia, added what he considered to be a ridiculous amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. He felt it was a ridiculous amendment because it gave women equal right in the work place—equal work for equal pay. He knew no man would vote for that amendment, and that way, he would stop the law that would give equal pay for equal work for Black men. He didn't count on Pauli Murray and the network of women. Murray wrote letters to the President, the First Lady, Senators and Representatives stating that if women were not included, half of the population would be disadvantaged. Discuss with your students the conundrum faced by Congress leaders. Leave the amendment in, the law would not pass. Take it out and they would be disenfranchising half of the population. Have the students research Representative Martha Griffiths and Senator Margaret Chase Smith who used Pauli's words and arguments to convince the rest of the Congress that giving equal pay for equal work for women was the right thing to do. Ask the students to research those two women's lives and how they got to their position in the U.S. Congress.

THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was set up for workers to bring complaints of discrimination against their employers—to make sure that the 1964 Civil Rights Act was being followed. But it wasn't. The EEOC took on cases of discrimination against Black employees, but did not pay attention to cases brought by women. In a speech, Pauli Murray said that perhaps women should form an organization like the NAACP to insure their rights were respected. It didn't take very long before before Murray, Betty Friedan and other women did exactly that. They formed N.O.W., the National Organization for Women. Have your students research both organizations and determine what they did, how they were similar and how they were different.

A MAN TRAPPED IN A WOMAN'S BODY

Even as a young girl, Pauli Murray questioned her sexuality. She felt more comfortable in boy's clothes. She never chose positions relegated to women. The most striking thing about Pauli Murray to the author is that even though, as she grew older, she had relationships with other women, Pauli never mentioned something so important in her autobiography. For a woman to be open about her sexual preference, if it was anything than a heterosexual preference, she would have been shunned by society and ended up unemployed and unable to do any of the world changing things Pauli ended up doing. She was convinced she was a man trapped in a woman's body. She researched hormone therapies—which were very much in the infancy of the science—and asked a doctor to check to see if she had hidden male organs during an appendectomy. Today we would say Pauli Murray was transgender. Discuss with your class what it must have been to live under those conditions.

VOCABULARY

As they read, have students list new words and define them in context and then with the help of a dictionary.

VERSE

The author chose verse as the way to portray Pauli Murray's life. Ask your students to discuss why the author would have made that decision. As they read, have students list metaphors and alliteration and other poetic devices that the authors use to tell Pauli Murray's story. Discuss with your students why they think that the authors used verse as the best way to tell this story.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Day 1:

Discuss/review with the entire class their understanding of Social Justice. Ask for suggestions/examples from the book.

Divide the students into small groups (four or five each) or let them suggest how they wish to set up their groupings. Let the entire class vote on it.

Give students 6 or 7 minutes to democratically select the following: Leader, Materials Manager, Recorder, and Reporter. Ask them to choose a name for the group and member responsibilities. Their group name should reflect advocacy or something social justice orientated (i.e., the advocates, activists, silent protesters, etc.)

Have the recorder write the group name selected and each member's assignment. Put the names of the group members on the group chart along with who is the Leader, Materials Manager, Recorder, and Reporter.

Have each group make a list of possible social justice type activities (e.g., nonviolent protest, voting on election day, a town hall meeting about a social justice event, etc.) and pick a topic from that list.

Have the group leader begin the discussion as to the method the group will use to illustrate their theme. They can create a collage of the event, make an illustration, do a painting, write a script to act out, plan to illustrate by a role-playing scenario, etc.

Homework: After planning in the classroom, each group should determine what classroom materials are available and determine which ones can be borrowed or gotten from home to bring to use at school.

Day 2:

When returning to class the next day the Materials Manager will do an inventory of gathered items and determine what is still needed. The art teacher could be a source of assistance for materials. Perhaps some of the activities could be done in her classroom.

Days 3 – 5:

Students can complete some parts of the project at home. The last day of the project should be each team reporting back to the whole group about their process, sharing their written reports and the art integration portion.