

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Pauli Murray

(November 20, 1910 – July 1, 1985)

“First Black Woman Awarded J.S.D. from Yale University & First Black Woman Episcopal Priest”



Anna Pauli Murray was born on November 20, 1910, in Baltimore, Maryland. She was the fourth of six children born to Agnes and William Murray. Her mother was a nurse, and her father was a Howard University graduate and taught in the Baltimore Public Schools. Pauli was orphaned at an early age when her mother died when Pauli was four years old. At the age of 13, Pauli lost her father. He was murdered by a white guard at the hospital he was confined to while he suffered with typhoid fever. Pauli was raised by a maternal aunt and her grand-parents in North Carolina. After high school, Pauli moved to New York and attended Hunter College, where she earned an English Literature degree.

Pauli often wrote articles and poems for various publications to include *Common Sense* and *The Crisis* - a publication of the NAACP. She became involved in the civil rights movement. In 1938, Pauli began a media and letter-writing campaign to enter graduate school at the all-white University of North Carolina. Despite a lack of support from the NAACP, Pauli's campaign received national publicity. During this time, Pauli developed a life-long friendship and correspondence with the first lady at the time, Eleanor Roosevelt.

In 1940, Pauli was arrested for violating segregation laws by sitting in a “whites only” section of a public bus. This incident along with her experience working with the Worker Defense League, led Pauli to enroll into law school at Howard University in 1941. It was during her time at Howard that she became acutely aware of the oppression that black people were facing. The following year Pauli joined George Houser, James Farmer, and Bayard Rustin to form the nonviolence-focused Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).



In 1944, Pauli, the only woman, graduated first in her class from Howard School of Law and was awarded The Rosenwald Fellowship. Previous top graduates had used the fellowship to attend Harvard University. However, despite winning the fellowship, Pauli was rejected from Harvard Law School based on her gender. Undeterred, Pauli attended the University of California and earned her Master of Laws (LLM) degree.



After graduation, Pauli returned to New York and published a book, *State's Laws on Race and Color* in 1951. Thurgood Marshall, who at that time was the head of the legal department at the NAACP, described the book as the “Bible” for civil rights litigators.

In 1956, Pauli published *Proud Shoes, The Story of an American Family*, a biography on her family's experiences with white supremacy and anti-blackness. She was offered a position with the litigation department of a prominent law firm, where she met her partner, Irene Barlow. She later traveled to Ghana and when she returned she enrolled in Yale Law School, making her the first black woman to receive a Doctor of Juridical Science (J.S.D.) degree.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy appointed Pauli to the Committee on Civil and Political Rights as a part of his Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. Continuing her work in civil rights, Pauli worked closely with Bayard Rustin, A. Phillip Randolph, and Martin Luther King, Jr., but was frustrated with the way the movement often placed her and other competent and capable women in secondary roles. In 1966, Pauli joined the National Organization for Women (NOW) alongside Betty Friedan, but later limited her involvement since the organization did not address the needs and issues of Black working-class women.

From 1968 to 1973, Pauli served as a faculty member at Brandeis University teaching an early American Studies program. In 1973, following the death of her longtime partner Irene Barlow, Pauli left her tenured position to become a candidate for ordination at General Theological Seminary.



In 1977, Pauli Murray became the first black woman in the U.S. to become an Episcopal Priest. The Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice is located in Durham, NC. On July 1, 1985, Dr. Pauli Murray died of cancer.

