

Pauli Murray: A Chapel Hill Legacy

By Timothy Elliott

Pauli Murray opened the envelope and read the letter there on University of North Carolina stationery. "Under the laws of North Carolina and under resolutions of the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina, members of your race are not admitted to the University," it read.

Murray, a Black woman, had applied to the University in 1938 after her graduation from Hunter College in New York. She wanted to do graduate work with sociologists Guy Johnson and Howard Odum, both of whom were outstanding scholars in the field of race relations. The letter in her hands was her answer: "...members of your race are not admitted to the University."

A Rejection—And A Beginning

The letter, dated Dec. 14, 1938, and written by the dean of the graduate school at the time, offered encouragement that the laws proving "graduate instruction for Negroes" would be favorably changed by the state legislature at the next General Assembly. Still, as Murray wrote later, "The rejection was not unexpected, but seeing the reason in black and white was infuriating."

The state legislature debated the issue in session from January to March in 1939. Before the state legislators even began arguing the subject, Murray began appealing her denial with letters to Frank Porter Graham, who was president of the University at the time. She put several questions about interracial relationships at the University to Graham; they included: "Does the concept of democracy include equal rights for minority groups?" and "If the purposes of higher education are to gain insight into social problems, what valid objection would White students have in admitting a Negro student to their classes?"

The validity of objections apparently was not a key issue. Murray also made appeals to the students and faculty of the school at the time with letters to *The Daily Tar Heel*. Some of the students at the time reacted to the thought of a Black student on campus with threats, as reported in a February issue of *The Daily Tar Heel*. One man was quoted as saying: "I think the state would close the University before they'd let a Negro in. I've never committed murder yet but if a Black boy tried to come into my home saying he was a 'University student'..."

In March of 1939, the state legislators finally passed what Murray called a "mealy-mouthed resolution that said when and if requested and if necessary...Negroes would be let in." Still, the University turned down Murray's second application, this time to the law school in 1939, and it was not until 1951 that the first Blacks were admitted to UNC.

A Chapel Hill Legacy

The relationship between Pauli Murray and the town of Chapel Hill goes back much further than 1938, however. It is somewhat ironic that racism would still plague Murray a little less than 100 years after a Southern, aristocratic woman did the at-the-time unthinkable and took in several illegitimate slave children and raised them as part of the family.

The precursor to this "unthinkable" action was far from noble, however. Mary Ruffin Smith was the daughter of James S. Smith, a congressman during the Monroe administration and a trustee of the University. James Smith owned 30 slaves, 5,000 acres of land and had a plantation in Hillsborough; Mary was his only daughter, Frank and Sydney were his sons. Mary Ruffin Smith's two brothers repeatedly raped a fair-skinned slave, but neither man acknowledged the illegitimate offspring they produced. Harriett, the slave the brothers raped and the mother of the children, was Pauli Murray's great grandmother.

Mary Smith accepted the scandal created in the proper Hillsborough society in the 1850s by acknowledged the children her brothers had produced and abandoned. The family moved away from the public eye to a plantation in Chapel Hill, presently the site of Smith Level Road. Mary Smith tutored the girls in domestic arts; they lived with Smith in the main house and all were baptized in the Episcopal Chapel of the Cross on Franklin Street.

When Mary Smith died in 1881, she left divided her land and possessions between UNC and Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina. She also left each of the children 100 acres of land and \$250, but much of the bequest went to the University, too. Still, the upbringing and recognition that Smith gave the children, one of whom would become Pauli's grandmother, set a course for Pauli Murray's descendants and therefore for Pauli herself. (The subject of her lineage and the connection with Chapel Hill-Durham area fascinated Murray, and she wrote a book about it. *Proud Shoes* was published in 1956—it was ignored in Chapel Hill at the time.)

Pauli Murray's Success Stories

After her rejections from UNC, Pauli Murray left Durham and went to law school at Howard University in 1940. She graduated *cum laude*, the head of her class, and Harvard University traditionally gave a fellowship to the top graduate from Howard. Harvard denied Murray the fellowship—the school did not admit women at the time. Harvard's rejection letter said: "Your picture and the salutation on your transcript indicate that you are not of the sex entitled to be admitted to Harvard Law School."



Pauli Murray

Despite the frustration Murray felt at the series of rejections, she accomplished a great deal in her lifetime. Before she died in 1985, Pauli Murray had earned degrees from not only Hunter College and the law school at Howard University, but also from the University of California at Berkeley and from Yale, where she earned a degree in 1965 and received an honorary doctorate in 1979.

Murray was a successful activist in the fields of both race and sex discrimination. According to an article in the March 1980 *Ms.* magazine, Murray "developed the strategy for employing nonviolent civil action that was widely used in the South in the 1960s" while she was still a law student at Howard. She was arrested in Petersburg, Va., in 1940 after she refused to move to the back of an interstate bus.

Some of Murray's accomplishments include the research and compilation of *State Laws on Race and Color*, a text which provided a state-by-state look at discriminatory laws on the books. Her senior thesis at Howard was used as background for the famous *Brown vs. Board of Education*, though she never received credit for it.

Pauli Murray worked, at various times in her life, as a lawyer for a prominent New York firm and as a professor at the University of Ghana in Africa. She also served on the Civil and Political Rights Committee of Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, and was a founder of National Organization of Women.

At age 62, she picked yet another fight against discrimination—Pauli Murray entered the seminary of the Episcopal Church, an effort to break into the centuries-old male hierarchy. In 1977, one week after the Episcopal church accepted women into the priesthood, she was ordained. She was the first Black woman to be ordained as such.

On the Winning Side

Murray gave her first sermon in the Episcopal Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, N.C.—where her slave grandmother was baptized more than 100 years before. The Feb. 18, 1977, issue of *The Daily Tar Heel* carried an account of the event: "I stand before you now, after rejection from Chapel Hill 39 years ago, proclaiming the healing power of Christ's love," Murray said.

Murray ministered to the spiritual needs of a "floating parish" in and around Alexandria, Virginia, according to the *Ms.* magazine article. She ministered mostly to the hospitalized and the homebound, and was directed "primarily to women and the aged of both sexes."

Pauli Murray died on July 1, 1985. On the day of her first sermon, Murray said that she represented "a symbol of the past, the suffering and the reconciliation." The years of segregation and frustration that Murray lived through did not make her bitter; instead, she was optimistic. "The good news," she said, "the South is rising out of its own ashes. It is being healed of unclean spirits. We shall overcome, Black and White together...I am on the winning side now."

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"She was a person of great dedication who fought long and hard for a cause outside of herself," said Lee Kessler, describing her long-time friend, Pauli Murray. The occasion was a tribute to Murray on her birthday, sponsored by the UNC-Chapel Hill Black Cultural Center. It was held at the Chapel of the Cross Sunday, Nov. 20.

About 80 people listened to speakers describe their experiences with Murray and read some of her poetry. The speakers included Kessler, a teacher at Phillips Junior

High School in Chapel Hill who was instrumental in getting Pauli's first book, *Proud Shoes*, reissued, and Floyd McKissick, the first Black student admitted to the UNC Law School.

Anyone wishing to find out more about Pauli Murray, her life, works and accomplishments can find a wealth of information in the books *Proud Shoes*, *Songs From a Weary Throat* and *Dark Testament and Other Poems*. For further information, contact the Black Cultural Center or any library.