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Virginia woman's fight tells story of 'ordinary heroes'

Rachel Nania
 WTOP-FM

ARLINGTON, Va. (AP) - When filmmaker Loki Mulholland decided to make a documentary about his mother's role in the civil rights movement, he tricked her into the project.

Originally, he planned to tell the stories of four civil rights activists in the '60s - including Joan Trumpauer Mulholland. He soon realized, however, that his mother's experiences were far too rich to be limited to part of a documentary. So, he got right to work on his new idea.

"At that point, I never told her there (wasn't anyone) else in the film. I didn't want her to back out of it. I (thought I'd) just ask for forgiveness later," Mulholland says.

It wasn't until the cameras started rolling that Mulholland heard the full story of his mother's participation in the movement, including dangerous run-ins with the Ku Klux Klan, multiple arrests and a famous photograph that's used to teach school children about one of the most controversial times in our nation's history.

"My mother never told me the stories. All I ever knew were the pictures," Mulholland says. Joan Trumpauer Mulholland was born in 1941 and was raised in Arlington during the years of segregation. She says she was always aware of segregation, but didn't realize the extent of its disparities until she was about 10 years old.

Trumpauer Mulholland was visiting relatives in rural Georgia when she dared her friend, Mary, to walk through the town's black community - a highly audacious act for a young, white Southern girl.

"So, we left our bikes and went for a stroll and it was just so blatant, the difference. I mean, the white section was poor enough - we're talking dirt roads and water from the (well) - but it was just so much worse in the black community, and the school is what really hit me," says Trumpauer Mulholland, who still lives in Arlington.

"The black school was just an unpainted shack, for lack of a better word. A one-room schoolhouse up on stone piles. outdoor plumbing and what looked like a potbelly stove for heat. It just really hit me, right then, just how unequal things were."

Back in northern Virginia, the conditions appeared to be better than rural Georgia, but segregation was still obvious. A wall by an Arlington hospital separated the neighborhoods and drivers often "locked the car doors" when traveling through certain neighborhoods off Lee Highway, Trumpauer Mulholland says.

When it was time for college, Trumpauer Mulholland went to Duke University. Contrary to her parents' wishes, she invested her time in more than just schoolwork; she began participating in the segregated school's sit-ins.

"I think my thinking was propelled in this direction by being sort of a literalist. We memorized Bible verses about how to treat each other and we had to memorize the Declaration of Independence back then, and we didn't practice what we preached," she says.

At Duke, Trumpauer Mulholland was one of two white women involved in the nonviolent protests - the other being her roommate. Other white women supported the effort, but because they were from the South, they felt they couldn't fully participate.

"They couldn't endanger their family that way, but they could slip us some money on the side," Trumpauer Mulholland says.

In her first year of college, Trumpauer Mulholland was arrested twice. She remembers the first time clearly.

"(My roommate) and I got back after dark from jail and there was a note that we were to report to the Dean of Women," she says. "She opened the door for us to her office and then she took out her keys and locked the door and sort of jiggled the keys and put them back in her pocket. I just remember that so vividly. And she tried to get us to agree that we wouldn't do this anymore. Oh, and (she asked), 'Have you called your parents?'"

Trumpauer Mulholland's mother, being from the Deep South, did not react well to the situation. Her father, a government bureaucrat, thought change should start at the top, not with sit-ins.

But change did start to take place on the ground. One year after her protests, she says, the all-white male Duke football team joined the picket line.

After her first year at Duke, Trumpauer Mulholland returned to the Washington, D.C., area and became active in NAG (Non-Violent Action Group) and Howard University's sympathy picket group.

"The fact that I had experience in sit-ins, was arrested twice and was from Arlington, where they were planning to go the next day, that made me particularly welcome," she says.

Trumpauer Mulholland participated in sit-ins throughout the area, including one at the Peoples Drug Store whites-only counter on Lee Highway and at the Woolworth's in Shirlington. Within a couple of weeks, the drug stores desegregated and protesters took to their next cause. One was at Glen Echo Park, where Trumpauer Mulholland would show up after work to picket.

Being white, she bought a handful of tickets for the park's carousel ride and handed them out to black protesters who were not allowed to purchase tickets.

As Loki Mulholland states in his documentary, there is a back of a line, and a back of a bus, but there is not a back of a carousel.

"Folks, ticket in hand, got arrested on the merry-go-round," Trumpauer Mulholland says. Also present at those protests were American Nazi groups. At the time, Trumpauer Mulholland didn't digest the lurking danger, although it most likely wouldn't have stalled her actions.

"I just wasn't worried about that one way or the other. I suspect at some level, I knew it could be dangerous because most of my relatives were in the Deep South and I'd heard them talk plenty. But no, I wasn't worried about dying," she says. "Fear paralyzes you and keeps you from doing what you need to do, from thinking what you need to think, to be as safe as you can do to deal with the situation."

Because her involvement with the movement was not approved by her parents, she moved out of their home and lived in an apartment on V Street NW, near Howard University. That summer, she also decided she didn't want to go back to Duke, which in 1961 began to integrate a few black students into its graduate and professional schools.

"This is not integration: Students, just a few at a time going through this. Real integration has to be a two-way street," she says.

So she applied to the historically black college Tougaloo, a "movement college," in Jackson, Miss. The school's charter was older than the segregation laws, so Trumpauer Mulholland was allowed to attend. She was the first white student to enroll at the college.

Getting down to Tougaloo, however, was a little more challenging than she could have predicted.

Trumpauer Mulholland decided to catch a free ride down to Jackson. She flew from Washington to New Orleans with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) to help keep the 1961 Freedom Rides going. But before she could offer much on-ground support, she was arrested after getting off a train in Jackson.

Or, as she says, "The state of Mississippi put me up for the summer."

Even though she is able to talk about the experience with a chuckle now, her summer was anything but lighthearted. After some time at the Hinds County Jail, Trumpauer Mulholland was transported to the Mississippi State Penitentiary Parchman.

"We wanted to believe we were coming out of this alive and in one piece, but it was one of the legends of brutality," she says about Parchman in "An Ordinary Hero."

She essentially slept on death row with other civil rights activists, where she shared a tiny, bare cell with a few other women.

"I think once or twice a week we got showers," she says.

Instead of posting bail, Trumpauer Mulholland worked her time off at Parchman.

"The idea was to make it as expensive and as inconvenient for the federal government," she says.

Her days were organized into a routine of quiet time, singing, exercise, a lesson of some sort and

meeting to pray once a week with a rabbi. After roughly two months, she was released shortly before the start of school.

As expected, Trumpauer Mulholland remained active in the community and in civil rights during her first few years at Tougaloo. And a sit-in in 1963 turned her into a more prominent figure in the movement.

Michael J. O'Brien, author of "We Shall Not Be Moved," explains that Jackson's Capitol Street was an area home to segregated businesses and shops; it was also home to boycotts.

"It was demeaning for blacks to go to Capitol Street, but they wanted to have access to the wonderful things that were there," says O'Brien, whose book details the historical Woolworth's sit-in in Jackson.

On May 28, Trumpauer Mulholland was "spotting" some protesters on the picket line on Capitol Street. However, the protesters were quickly arrested, and the protest fizzled out. So she went down to the Woolworth's where a sit-in was taking place.

The sit-in started around 11 a.m. and was relatively quiet in the first hour, O'Brien says. But around noon, things started to pick up when the lunch crowd came in and when the local high school was released early after exams.

Two black women and one black man sat at the counter; all three were violently pulled off their stools. When Trumpauer Mulholland spotted a knife in the crowd, she yelled to her friend, "Annie, he's got a knife!"

"That sort of really identified me, so it was safer (for me) to sit at the counter, which was sort of the idea anyway, because you don't want to get stuck in the crowd and pulled out of the store to who knows where," Trumpauer Mulholland says.

She eventually took a seat at the counter and was soon dragged out. The man who grabbed her was arrested and Trumpauer Mulholland made her way back into the store and sat back down at the counter.

"When Joan sat down, she was the first white person to join the demonstration and for whites who had always been taught that was totally off limits, when they saw that, it sparked something in them that they just couldn't live with," O'Brien says.

Civil rights activist John Salter, who was not black, came into Woolworth's and took a seat at the counter as well. He was hit with brass knuckles; condiments were poured on his head and cigarette butts were put out on his neck.

All the time, the manager of the Woolworth's refused to close the store, and police remained on the outside the store for the three-hour event, due to a Supreme Court decision a few weeks before which ruled police had to be invited to stop a protest by the store manager.

The media was also present at the sit-in to capture the rowdy crowd. One of the photos taken on that day by Fred Blackwell is one of the most recognized photos from the civil rights movement era.

"When I first met Joan and her kids, the kids would always say, 'My mom's in a famous picture,'" says O'Brien, who met Trumpauer Mulholland several years ago in Arlington.

"This photograph has now become an iconic photograph. It shows how angry and difficult and complicated a mob can become when this is allowed to happen."

Trumpauer Mulholland says the photo shows a lot of emotion without a whole lot of violence, making it easier for school children to absorb and digest - one explanation for why it's in school history books.

For son Loki Mulholland, the photo was just how he identified his mother growing up. "By the time I graduated from high school, I knew my mother had been involved in the movement, and we were familiar enough with that, but not necessarily the details with the story. That's just what mom did. The sit-in photo became her prom photo for us. It's just mom," he says.

Shortly after the Jackson Woolworth's sit-in and the riots in Birmingham, Ala., President Kennedy called for the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which was eventually signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2, 1964.

For Trumpauer Mulholland, the battle for civil rights hasn't stopped. "It's not over. We're still working on it," she says.

And while she's not manning the barricades and standing on the picket line, she still remains active in igniting change through education.

"Now, speaking to groups and trying to pass it forward. I think that's my role now," she says. "Our ideas of issues has broadened and what we have done had been adopted by people all over this country and all over the world. Now it's become downright fashionable to call out an issue."

O'Brien says, "I think it needs to be said that clearly, thanks to what Joan and others did back in the '60s, things have changed dramatically for our society. Obviously, they're not perfect. But when you go back to Mississippi today, there are blacks in every level of government and business, in ways that just couldn't be imagined back then."

And while a 10-year-old's daring walk through a black community opened her eyes to racial inequality, Trumpauer Mulholland says her motivation to ignite change stemmed from the fact that she's a Southerner.

"I was a Southerner; no two ways about it. I think that's what brought me to it - that the South should be the best that it could be and maybe people would quit looking down on us," she says.

Her son highlights her philosophy with a quote in the film. "You have to pick your battles. Mine was the Southern way of life."

The Carolina Times

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