

The Mother

When talking about the Civil Rights Movement, names like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks come to mind. While these three leaders are some of the most notable leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, we know that thousands of others contributed to the movement that we haven't heard of in our textbooks. Clara Luper, for example, was a strong activist in Oklahoma that spread awareness of the fight for civil rights nationwide.

Clara Luper has been known as the mother of the Civil Rights Movement in Oklahoma. In all of my time at school, I cannot remember a time when I heard her name. After doing some research on influential Civil Rights Leaders during the movement, I have discovered just how important Clara Luper was. Clara Luper had a massive impact not only on Oklahoma but on the whole fight for civil rights.

Clara Luper was born in Okfuskee County, Oklahoma in 1923. Luper was brought up post-World War I and post-Tulsa Race Massacre, both huge events affecting how she grew up and fought for people like herself. Luper's father, Ezell Shepard, was a World War I veteran and continued to work as a laborer for the rest of his life. Luper's mother, Isabell Shepard, worked as a laundress. As a result of being born after the Tulsa Race Massacre and her father being a World War I Veteran, Clara Luper was able to see how people of color were treated by government officials in Oklahoma and the United States. One of the things that I love most about Clara Luper is that she decided enough was enough. She was living through governmental abuse and neglect of people of color and peacefully made her mark on the Civil Rights Movement until her death in 2011.

From Luper's earliest days in college to her final days, she remained revolutionary. Luper attended Langston University to receive her B.A. in mathematics and a minor in history. She continued to further her education by attending the University of Oklahoma to earn her M.A. in History Education in 1951. Luper was determined to continue her education but faced some difficulties while at the University of Oklahoma. Clara Luper was among one of the first groups of black students to be integrated at the university, and thus, had a difficult time with professors, fellow students, and segregated facilities. Even when one of Luper's professors openly expressed his disdain to have a black student in his class, Luper remained motivated and strived to prove her professor wrong; and she did just that. She proved her professor wrong by showing just how hard a Black student like herself could work in class and by her success.

Over the years, Clara Luper did prove that she could be a successful, influential Black woman and teacher. Not only did she fight for her right to higher education, but she also helped other children get a sufficient education. Mrs. Luper worked as a history teacher in the black part of town at Dunjee High School in East Oklahoma City. While teaching at Dunjee High School, Luper became inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s successes in peaceful protests and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Luper became the Oklahoma City NAACP Youth Council advisor and started to launch her own civil protests. With her youth council, she wrote a play that was invited to be shown in New York City. Their play was called "Brother President" and showed how important peaceful protests like Dr. King's were to the fight for civil rights.

Luper's activism was far from over after her trip to New York City. Luper, her children, and members of the NAACP Youth Council were only inspired to launch protests by seeing what life was like for people of color in New York. On August 19, 1958, Luper and a group of Youth Council members staged their first sit-in. The members walked into the Katz drug store in

downtown Oklahoma City. They all sat down at the counter and demanded to be served like everyone else. They were refused service but continued to sit quietly and politely at the counter. Luper and her fellow Youth Council members were spit at, shouted at, and harassed. Even though the group was harassed throughout the whole day, they stayed. They sat demanding to be served and waited until they would be. When they were not served on August 19, they did not stop. The group came back until the counter was desegregated, which fortunately was two days after their initial protest. Katz drug store was a chain of drug stores out of Kansas City and had locations in Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa. Clara Luper had been successful yet again, influencing racism and inspiring others to engage in peaceful protests.

Clara Luper and members of the NAACP did not stop sit-ins at Katz drug store. Luper and members kept their momentum up and continued sit-ins, even at difficult locations. They approached locations like Anne Maude's Cafeteria, the Skirvin Hotel, the Pink Kitchen, John A. Brown's Luncheonette, and the Split T. All five of these locations were difficult to desegregate, but with peace and persistence, Clara Luper got it done. Despite the stresses of sit-ins, Luper remained civil and was willing to collaborate with business owners in order to get the businesses integrated.

Other activists soon followed Luper's suit of sit-ins. Approximately 17 months after the Katz sit-in, the Greensboro sit-ins began. Several young, African American college students came to Woolworth's in downtown Greensboro and demanded to be served at the counter. The students were peaceful, collected, and motivated. They alerted media sources and encouraged more students to join them in their peaceful sit-in. Like Luper and her group, the students came back the next day after closing and sat at the counter again, and again, and again until they got

the counter desegregated. The Greensboro sit-in helped give national attention to sit-ins like Clara Luper's, inspired others to do the same, and propelled the Civil Rights Movement forward. Clara Luper continued to launch her own protests for Civil Rights, but she joined Martin Luther King, Jr. in his protest as well. She was able to take part in Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 and was active in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches. During the Selma to Montgomery march, Luper was one of the 600 people who were attacked by local police on "Bloody Sunday." Luper recieved a deep gash in her leg and was tear-gassed, but nothing could stop Luper from her activism.

Roughly a year later, Luper led her own march from Oklahoma City to Lawton. On July 4, 1966, 88 people, including Luper, set out for the March to Fort Sill. Luper was marching for Fort Sill's soldiers who had given up their life to protect democracy, but did not get to enjoy the same accommodations that White soldiers were able to. The main goal of this march was to help Black citizens to be able to enjoy the Doe Doe Amusement Park, who despite their own efforts in Lawton, were not able to persuade owner Ben Hutchins, Sr. With the recent death of Vietnam Veteran and former NAACP Youth Council member Willie J. Cole, Luper decided to dedicate the march to him and his legacy. As marchers set out from the capitol in Oklahoma City, headed south toward Lawton. Along the way, the group was met with encouragement from people in Chickasha, surrounding towns, and even surrounding states. When they finally arrived in Lawton, residents had food and water stations set up. People from all across the state joined them, and Ben Hutchins, Sr. soon conceded to talk about an arrangement with Luper. Together, Luper, Hutchins, and the mayor of Lawton met to collaborate on the issue of segregation. The mayor pronounced that an ordinance was to be adopted that would eliminate segregation in all places in Lawton that very week.

In 1972, Clara Luper decided to try to make her voice heard even louder. Luper decided to run for U.S. Senate to represent Oklahoma. Luper campaigned across the State, but unfortunately lost at the ballot. Regardless of her loss, I still believe that Luper's campaign has been one of the most noteworthy elections in Oklahoma. During her campaign, reporters interrogated Luper about her ability to represent white people, and she responded, "Of course I can represent White People, Black People, Red People, Yellow People, Brown People, and Polka Dot People. You see, I have lived long enough to know that people are people." I find this quote by Luper to be inspiring because we often get so caught up in people's ethnicities, races, sexual orientations, and political affiliations, but these things do not matter. There is no difference between the levels of humanity amongst the now eight billion people scattered around the globe and her whole life, Luper demonstrated this.

Throughout her life, Clara Luper was able to display values of civility, civics, and collaboration. Luper showed civility by being calm and collected in her protests. Luper showed a dedication to civics by learning about history and government as much as she could and getting involved with government and forums herself. Luper showed collaboration by working with both like-minded Civil Rights Activists and people who disagreed with her in order to achieve her goals. And from her hard work, Clara Luper has rightfully gained the title of Oklahoma's Mother of Civil Rights.

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