

Marie Moton Medley-Howard from

Essence of a People: African Americans Who Made a Difference in Loudoun County, Virginia

Marie Medley-Howard was born in Leesburg and raised in the home her parents, Jesse and Molly Moton, owned on Edwards Ferry Road. This is now the site of the Barrister Building, which houses the offices of the NAACP's Loudoun branch. She received her early education in Leesburg and graduated from high school in Washington, D. C. She also attended Madam C. J. Walker's school of cosmetology and later opened a beauty shop near her childhood home.

Medley-Howard believed that education was the key to civil rights. She lectured the local children and the young women who had their hair done in her shop about everything from proper dress and deportment to civil rights. At meetings of the County-Wide League and the NAACP, she was outspoken on the topic of education and equal rights. She gave her opinion whether it was desired or not and did not think twice about the consequences. When one saw this handsome woman strut to a dais with her impressive carriage, perfectly done nails, tailored suit, and hat stylishly cocked to the side of her head, everyone knew she had something to say.

She was a leader in the struggle to force the Loudoun County Board of Education to improve the standards for African American children and fought bitterly with the Superintendent Emerick over the condition of Loudoun County Training School on Union Street. The school designated by the county for black children was located in an old, unsafe building that housed the elementary school downstairs and the high school upstairs. It had no fire escape or inside toilet. In addition no transportation was provided for the children, and the curriculum was so limited that that the Commonwealth of Virginia would not accredit the school.

Medley-Howard and others in the African American community worked tirelessly for years to change the situation by raising money and purchasing land for a new school. But they ran into constant foot-dragging and open opposition to the building of an adequate school for

black students. Eventually the County-Wide League decided to engage a lawyer, Charles Huston, a former Howard Law School dean and director of litigations for the NAACP. Huston suggested that since litigation might be necessary, the community should form a Loudoun County branch of the NAACP. It was formed in 1940, and Medley-Howard became its first president.

The Leesburg Parent-Teacher Association wrote Huston that Marie Medley and three other women would be going with him to inspect the proceedings, receipt, and disbursement records of the Loudoun County School Board, going back to 1930. Another time, at Medley Howard's home, a lawyer from Huston's firm met with eleven people who wanted the NAACP to help them get a better education for their children. These efforts, as well as those of the County-Wide League and letters from parents and church groups to the school board, led ultimately to the building of the Douglass School which opened in late 1941 and is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

Medley-Howard was a true community activist, often working with others to organize fund-raising activities. After World War II, she championed the NAACP initiative that urged all returning veterans to register to vote. The Loudoun Branch NAACP now presents an annual Marie Medley-Howard Award to a person in its organization who most exemplifies the resounding commitment to the struggle for human rights, education, and justice that its namesake did.

"Marie Medley-Howard was my Aunt Ree," says Irene Bobich, "and I traveled with her to local and national NAACP meetings and when she spoke to church groups. When I was eleven, she bought me an NAACP youth membership. I proudly showed my membership card whenever we attended meetings. In her declining years, Aunt Ree always wanted to hear about the NAACP's Loudoun Branch. Even after she moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where her son was buried, she kept track of the Loudoun NAACP."

"During the darkest times for civil rights, Marie Medley-Howard had faith that things would get better. To me, she represented something to aim for, someone to emulate. She affected everyone who knew her. She gave us something solid to build a life on."