

Pauli Murray's story is a song not easy to sing



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

"The persistent power of an idea whose time [has] clearly come." —Pauli Murray

It's not often I read a 500-page book, but "Song in a Weary Throat" (1987) by Pauli Murray is worth the time and effort. Some books, this one included, present a compelling story that makes the reader wish it was longer ("Proud Shoes," an earlier memoir, was published in 1956).

The Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray (1910-1985) was a poet, priest, educator, lawyer, pioneer in human rights and "typewriter activist" who consistently challenged injustice. This remarkable woman guides us through a turbulent life-journey while offering a grounded hope that persistence can truly bring change.

Attending New York City's Hunter College in the 1930s, one of only four black women in her class, she struggled with unemployment and poverty for several years, eventually joining the Workers' Education Project in 1936. Even in those difficult times — and no doubt because of them — she could write:

"It seems to me that the testing ground of democracy and Christianity in the United States is in the South; that



An undated photo of Pauli Murray from the UNC Library archives. COURTESY OF UNC DIGITAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

it is the duty of Negroes to press for political, economic and educational equality for themselves and for disinherited whites ... and that the job of interpretation and leadership falls to those of both races with a knowledge of the problems and an understanding of the tremendous task to be accomplished."

Rejected by UNC in 1938 she went on to study at Howard Law School. Rejected by Harvard, she studied at Boalt Hall

of Law (masters) and Yale (doctorate), proceeding to a professorship at Brandeis.

Her correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt began when she boldly wrote to Franklin Roosevelt, questioning the president's resolve to address the "in-sults, injustices [and the] un-Christian, un-American conditions in the South."

Her fiery letter continued, "Have you raised your voice loud enough against

Pauli Murray at the movies

Pioneering civil rights activist Pauli Murray is portrayed in the new movie "On the Basis of Sex," about the early legal work of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Portrayed by actress Sharon Washington, Murray is one of three Ginsburg mentors who serve as "judges" in a mock trial scene when Ruth and her husband Marty are preparing for a groundbreaking court appearance on equal protection for both sexes. The film is now showing at Asheville's Fine Arts Theatre.

the burning of our people? Why has our government refused to pass anti-lynching legislation?"

Wisely, Murray sent a copy of her letter to the First Lady, who responded in a manner that "did not ease [Pauli's] impatience." Eleanor tried to calm the youthful enthusiasm with "great changes come slowly" and "don't push too hard." This exchange led to years of letters and the developing of a friendship that lasted until Eleanor's death in 1962.

Arrested on a bus 15 years before Rosa Parks, Murray's eloquent writing strengthened the Supreme Court case for Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) that desegregated schools.

Having worked with the NAACP, the

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