

Dorothy Hamm's Path to Civil Rights for all Arlingtonians

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Today, Arlington is a socially-progressive community. But over the past one hundred years, many people have helped to establish the values we now embrace. Among these influentials, one stands out among the rest: Dorothy Bigelow Hamm. Dorothy was an Arlington civil rights activist who not only improved civil rights in Arlington but served as a catalyst for improving civil rights throughout Virginia.

Dorothy made progressive changes in Arlington when the county was not a forward-thinking society. One of Dorothy's most important efforts was fighting for desegregation in Arlington Public schools. She believed all Virginians deserved the right to equal education, no matter their race.

Dorothy was born in 1919, in Caroline County, Va. But Dorothy and her family later moved to Fairfax County, Va., so she could attend schools in Washington D.C. This was because her home town lacked good educational opportunities. Her parent's desire to give Dorothy a good education likely impressed upon her that everyone deserves equal access to good schools. As her schooling progressed, Dorothy continued to pursue higher education. After Dorothy graduated from Armstrong High school in D.C., she later attended and earned degrees from Miner Teachers College and took classes at Cortez Business School, and George Washington University.

In 1942, Dorothy married Edward Leslie Hamm, Sr., and they moved to Arlington, where they raised three children. Dorothy wanted her children to attend schools in their neighborhood, but it wasn't possible because of the deeply segregated school system. This unfairness she saw in her community made Dorothy passionate about desegregation, not just for her children, but for everyone in the area.

As a life-long Arlington resident and one of its officers of elections in for more than 27 years, Dorothy understood the cultural undertones of Arlington. As an election officer, she saw first hand the voting discrimination, and because of this discrimination, she worked to eliminate poll tax and remove race designation from public forms and voting records.

Dorothy also held government jobs, spending nearly 50 years serving as a civil servant. Her first government position was a file clerk for the Veteran's Administration in the early 1940s. She retired in 1963 from her last government job working for the Defense Department's Surgeon General's Office.

On Dorothy's side, as a career civil servant, she understood the government and how to advocate to change laws.

Dorothy's motivation to fight for desegregation came from a simple but very tough question her son asked her, "Why can't I?" This question came after she explained to her son that he couldn't attend the school's everyone else in his neighborhood could attend. Dorothy tried to explain that those schools were for white people, but that was a fact that Dorothy could not accept. She knew that separate but equal laws were unjust, unfair, and needed to be changed.

One of the most pivotal moments of Dorothy's advocacy efforts, came one month after the Brown v Board ruling, a landmark ruling that found any segregation based on race in schools was illegal. A group of Arlington activists who were frustrated with Virginia's laws decided to take a step towards desegregation. This group began by working on breaking Virginia's policy on "massive resistance" to desegregation. Massive

resistance was a law passed by the state governor in 1956 to prevent the integration of Virginia schools. Virginia was not cooperating with the laws of the Supreme Court, making desegregation in the state very hard to pass.

With some help, Dorothy became a plaintiff in the civil action case that sought to end segregation in all Arlington public schools. Dorothy and her husband worked together on this case. And, after a year of hard work, Virginia still had not taken any actions towards integration.

Dorothy and her husband decided to enroll their son in the all-white Stratford middle school, along with a few other African American students. They were denied admission but wouldn't give up trying. On Jan. 19, 1959, they finally had a win. The Virginia supreme court outlawed Senator Harry F. Byrd's statewide policy of "massive resistance." This ruling meant that any integration was now legal.

The desegregation of schools in Virginia started in Arlington. That same year "massive resistance" was defeated, and four 12-year-old African American students entered Arlington's Stratford Middle School, making Virginia history. Their names were Ronald Deskins, Michael Jones, Lance Newman, and Gloria Thompson.

In only a few years after she began her fight, Dorothy had achieved her goal of desegregating Arlington public schools, but her civic career was far from over.

She continued to fight for equal rights and was involved in two other major civil action cases. These cases helped further integrate Arlington.

In 1960, Dorothy fought for the Pupil Placement Form, which was a way to get around the supreme court ruling to desegregate schools and placed African Americans

in certain schools. The second civil action case Dorothy advocated for happened in 1961. Dorothy again became a plaintiff in a court action to integrate athletic programs in Arlington Public schools. Her son was not allowed to try out for any sports and she felt this was extremely unfair. As a result of her civil action case, discrimination in the Arlington athletics program was declared illegal.

Dorothy's efforts did not go unrecognized by our state. In 2002, the Virginia legislature enacted a resolution recognizing Dorothy Hamm for her great effort in the civil rights movement. Another way Arlington celebrated her achievement was in 2019. A new Arlington middle school was named after her in recognition of her efforts to make Arlington the inclusive community it is today.

Dorothy Hamm's courage to fight against the Arlington School system for her children, and all of Virginia's children who were not given equal access to a good education, makes her one of Arlington's heroes. She changed the Arlington school system from one that was exclusive to one that welcomes diversity and inclusivity as the fundamental values of our local society. Arlingtonians should remember Dorothy Hamm as one of our most significant historical figures over the past one hundred years. Her legacy reminds us that others have fought to make our community an inclusive place, and as a society, we are stronger for it.

Works Cited

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