

Elizabeth Campbell

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Nelson Mandela once said, “It is not beyond our power to create a world in which all children have access to a good education.” This quote represents the beliefs of many activists during the twentieth century who were fighting for school desegregation. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court declared that schools could no longer be segregated. This led to protests throughout the South, and in Virginia, some schools refused to desegregate. This led to people like Elizabeth Campbell and her husband Edmund Campbell leading legal campaigns to end segregation in Virginia schools. Elizabeth Campbell made a significant contribution in Arlington as she supported desegregation, was a member of the Arlington School Board, and helped lead the Washington Educational Television Association.

Elizabeth Campbell was born on December 4, 1902, in Clemmons, North Carolina. After graduating from Salem Academy and Salem College, she attended Columbia’s Teacher’s College in New York, where she received her master’s degree in Education. Elizabeth began her career in education by teaching literature at Salem Academy. She then served as dean of women at Moravian College for Women in Pennsylvania for two years. She later served as dean of Mary Baldwin College in Staunton from 1929 to 1936. She moved to Arlington, Virginia in 1936, and married Edmund Campbell, a lawyer from Lexington, Virginia. Edmund Campbell had two children from his previous marriage, and he and Elizabeth had three more sons.

Both Elizabeth and Edmund Campbell valued standing up for what they believed in. Edmund Campbell once said, “I could not live with myself if I did not stand up publicly for what I knew was right.” Edmund was leading a legal campaign to end segregation in Virginia schools, and Elizabeth wanted to support him. To do this, she ran for a position on the Arlington School Board in 1947. She was elected, and became the first woman to serve on a school board in Virginia. She continued to serve after she was reelected in 1951, and during this time, she proposed that Arlington should begin desegregating schools. This idea was opposed, and in 1955, Virginia adopted a policy of Massive Resistance, which took away Arlington’s ability to elect its own school board members. This meant that Elizabeth Campbell lost her seat on the board. She was later reelected in 1960, and she served as chair until 1962. At this point, Elizabeth and Edmund Campbell had accomplished their goal of desegregating Virginia’s schools.

After Elizabeth Campbell served on the school board, she wanted to continue helping others get access to an education. She believed that television was a great

way to educate people, and once said, “Our schools and universities are vital resources, but it has been my belief for a very long time that television and radio can be powerful educators as well. However, television and radio are simply broadcast tools - it is the programming that counts. That’s why public broadcasting is so important.” To achieve her goal of creating an educational television program, she helped found the Greater Washington Educational Television Association, also known as GWETA, in 1953. GWETA was a group of local schools and cultural institutions, and its goal was to create educational television programs that could provide an education to people in D.C. and the surrounding areas. Elizabeth Campbell was elected president of the Washington Educational Television Association in 1957. In 1961, GWETA launched the Washington Educational Television Association station, which was the first educational television station in the D.C. area. Elizabeth Campbell served as president of the Washington Educational Television Association until 1971. She then served as Vice President of Community Affairs until her death in 2004.

Elizabeth Campbell’s contributions left a significant impact on Arlington. By being elected to the school board, she showed people that women could be great leaders if given the chance. Her work to desegregate Virginia school systems while serving on the Arlington School Board was one of the reasons that schools were desegregated and all students were given access to a high quality education. During her time on the board, her leadership led to funding for new schools, higher salaries for teachers, and the introduction of programs such as music classes and special education classes. The time that she spent raising funds and collecting donations in order to fund the Washington Educational Television Association station resulted in the creation of one of the most popular educational television stations that still provides the D.C. area with educational programs. She was the recipient of awards such as Washingtonian of the Year in 1978 and the Ralph Lowell Award in 1996. In 2009, five years after her death, Arlington County erected a historical marker in honor of her. In honor of Elizabeth Campbell, Campbell Elementary School was named to memorialize Elizabeth and Edmund Campbell.

Elizabeth Campbell made a significant contribution to Arlington. Although there are other people who contributed to making Arlington a better place, few can compare to the size of the impact that Elizabeth Campbell had. She believed that education was the key to leading a good life, and that if a place did not have a good school system then it would not be a good place to live. She was one of the main believers in desegregating Arlington schools, and without her pushing for it, it would have taken much longer for students to be treated equally. Without her dedication to education, Arlington schools would be nowhere near as

good as they are today. Thanks to her, Arlington County is now viewed as one of the best places to live in the United States due to the high quality education that students receive. Because of Elizabeth Campbell, Arlington is a better place for all.

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