

Impact of Joan Mulholland on Arlington

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Many individuals have made significant contributions to making Arlington a better place, amongst those individuals is Joan Mulholland. She is best known for being a white freedom rider, she was the first white to integrate into Tougaloo College (a colored school) and is a prime example of what it means to be an Arlingtonian. She saw all of the flaws in society and chose to do something about it, she endured much suffering so that others wouldn't and was not afraid to show it. Her story is a roller coaster that begins in Arlington and has a few bumps along the way but ends peacefully back in Arlington where she started the Joan Trumpauer Mulholland Foundation, dedicated to educating youth about the Civil Rights Movement and how to become activists in their communities.

She was born on September 14, 1941 (Laff, 2017), "My mom was a secretary/stay home mom who was from rural Georgia and my father was from southwest Iowa and worked for the Department of State" (Mulholland, 2013). Joan attended Presbyterian Church where she learned and memorized Bible verses such as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for such is the Kingdom of God." (Mulholland, 2013). By law, her church was segregated, but even when her family left the church, they still avoided black people, and as a child that bothered her. While visiting her grandmother in Georgia as a kid, one of her friends dared her to walk in the so-called "n*****s town" located on the other side of the train tracks. That was her first real encounter with black people; she noted that they were uneasy of her presence, and she did not like that feeling. This was the moment that sparked her to be a civil rights activist to close the divide between races. One day, her church youth group secretly met up with a few black students to have dinner together, she joked saying that "It was her first real conversation with black people but also her first real conversation with white people." (Mulholland, 2013)

Joan wanted to go to a small midwestern school where she could be known by everyone, but her mother rejected that school, worried that it would be integrated. Joan was forced to go to Duke University instead. When Durham became one of the first cities to do sit-ins, Joan rushed to the front lines to help. She had been arrested twice before the end of her freshman year, and she had just barely gotten a taste of animosity. It was not long before she brought her activism back to Arlington, where she met a group of students from Howard University called NAG (Nonviolent Action Group). On June 10, 1960, they attempted to integrate the lunch counter of the Drug Fair drugstore in Cherrydale, a small neighborhood in Arlington. "After the store closed, police rushed the protestors to

their waiting cars while gunshots rang out.” (McClellan, “Tales of a Freedom Rider”). The group later held sit-ins at a Peoples Drug at the corner of Lee Highway and Old Dominion Drive, and at a Woolworth’s in Shirlington, where they were counter protested by Nazis. Eventually after they integrated those restaurants, nearly every other business in Arlington followed suit and integrated. After the group succeeded integrating the lunch counters in Arlington, they went to Glen Echo Park in Maryland. Joan realized her special role as a white activist on the front lines, “I could do things that the black students couldn’t do.” (Mulholland, 2013) She would go buy tickets for everyone so they could ride the merry-go-round, and then the arrest would be made while they were riding it.



Joan decided that she was done with Duke and did not return, and went to live in a small apartment in DC, organizing freedom riders. One night a friend in Alabama called her saying that he and a bunch of other freedom riders were trapped in a church and they needed more freedom riders. Spurred by the call to action, Joan and a few others took a train south to Jackson, Mississippi where she was arrested and taken to jail for waiting in the colored waiting room of the train station. The county jail was too crowded, so she was taken to a death row prison. “I kept a diary under my skirt.” (Mulholland, 2013). To this day she still has the diary. Joan had been accepted into Tougaloo college while in jail and decided to stay in jail longer, “The Freedom Rides got me to Mississippi, and [prison] was free room and board for the summer,” (Mulholland, 2013).

It was at Tougaloo where she met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, and Anne Moody. She was the first white student to enroll at Tougaloo and was the first white to be accepted into Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. “Joan thought that if the whites were rioting when the blacks were going to white schools, what would happen if the whites went to black schools” (Harris, 2017). During her time in college there were cross burnings and she received lots of hate mail from people who were worried that something would happen between her and a black man.

Her mom did not approve of her going to Tougaloo and thought she had been brainwashed by a cult. They bribed her with a trip to Europe if she left Tougaloo and, of course, she accepted it but then went straight back to Tougaloo.



Photo taken by Fred Blackwell

In the middle of her junior year at Tougaloo, she found herself in the midst of a historic sit-in. The sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter in downtown Jackson, Mississippi was one of the most violent sit-ins in history. When she arrived to join the sit-in, there was already a mob and one man had been pulled off his chair and beaten up by a former policeman. When she sat down someone began pouring sugar on her, as you can see in the photo above. At one point she was violently dragged out of her seat by two men, but they were immediately arrested by the police, so she went back in and sat down. During this entire time people were berating her with hate speech even calling her a white n****r. "But basically, we didn't think we were going to get out of there alive." (McClellan, "Tales of a Freedom Rider"). Eventually the store closed, and the protestors were able to escape from the mob. She helped organize the August 1963 March on Washington and then graduated from Tougaloo in 1964. Joan came back home to Arlington, where she married, had five sons, and later divorced.

She worked as a teacher's aide at Patrick Henry Elementary School, and she remained quiet about her past until recently. She started the Joan Trumpauer Mulholland Foundation in 2014, and goes to schools teaching students how to be

activists in their communities, and participated in an interview sharing her story for the Library of Congress. “She still lives in the same Cape Cod in Arlington’s Barcroft neighborhood that she bought in 1976.” (McClellan, “Tales of a Freedom Rider”).

Miss Mulholland, was a dedicated activist, bent on making her community a better place for all. If it was not for people like her, Arlington could still be segregated, protests could have been more violent and possibly another civil war, who knows? But Joan knew if she treated others better, then maybe they would start to treat others better too. She sacrificed her relations with her family so she could fight for what is right and I’m thankful that. Because of her, I am so privileged to be able to sit with all of my friends at lunch, that I don’t even have to consider it a privilege.

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