Tacoma’s Struggle for Civil Rights

Debra King was the first African American woman employed by the Tacoma City Planning Department, ca. 1975
WSHS 2003.1.228
Early Tacoma Activists

Tacoma’s black citizens worked to end discrimination before the civil rights movement began. The Tacoma chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1913. From the beginning, the NAACP had both black and white members. The organization fought to guarantee equal treatment for all people. Eventually, its members became active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Nettie J. Asberry founded Tacoma’s NAACP. It was the first chapter west of the Rocky Mountains. Tacoma’s chapter is just four years younger than the national organization. Asberry began other organizations, many for women. In 1917, she founded the Washington State Federation of Colored Women’s Organizations.

In 1961, Asberry said, “Courage is the saving grace in this tense world racial situation. Courage of the white people who dare to show their fairness by helping us achieve positions of human dignity; and courage of those of other races who risk insults by quietly asserting their rights as human beings.”
During World War II from 1941-1945, many black people moved to Tacoma. They either served in the military or worked in an industry supporting the war. Some experienced discrimination when they wanted to rent or buy a home. Nettie Asberry and a Longshoreman named Ernie Tanner wanted to end this discrimination. They created the Tacoma Inter-racial Council. The council fought to end this unfair treatment.

Jack Tanner, Ernie Tanner's son, applied his father's example of leadership to law and the NAACP. As a lawyer, he used laws to end discrimination in housing, services, and employment. As president of the Tacoma chapter of NAACP, used the same tactics. He was a member of the national group that met with President John F. Kennedy. He made suggestions for the federal civil rights legislation that was being drafted. In 1978 he became a U.S. District Court judge. Jack Tanner was the first African American to hold such a position in the Northwest.
The national civil rights movement was growing in the 1950s and 1960s. This brought hope to African Americans in Tacoma. However, it also made them frustrated.

In the South, there were segregation laws. This meant separating blacks and whites in public places like schools and restaurants. Some brave people began leading nonviolent protests against segregation. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was one of these people. He became a leader for the whole country.

After many protests, Congress created a new law. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made segregation illegal. Some Tacomans traveled to help protest in the South. Other Tacomans worked to make life in Tacoma better. They worked to end discrimination in education, public places, and at workplaces.

People became frustrated. They disagreed about how to end segregation and discrimination. Then, Dr. King was killed. This led to violence in the South and the North. Tacomans worried about how their city would react to what had happened.
Instead of violent protests, Tacomans looked for other ways to fight discrimination. Many black organizations were created in the 1970s to address the problems facing African Americans such as housing. Other organizations updated and built new buildings like the Tacoma Urban League. A new education program created by Dr. Maxine Mimms began in the Hilltop neighborhood. Ten years later, this program became The Evergreen State College Tacoma.

A group called Concerned Black Citizens became the Black Collective. The Black Collective still exists today. They meet every week to address issues affecting the Black community of Tacoma and Pierce County. Members include civil rights activists from many different groups. Volunteers continue to run the organization and its members make decisions through voting.
Leadership in Tacoma’s civil rights movement is found at all levels. Individuals have taken a stand against racism and some have held public office. African Americans have served in many different public positions.

Harold Moss became the city’s first black mayor in 1994 after serving on the city council. Many more have followed him serving in public office.

Tacoma elected Marilyn Strickland first to city council in 2008. Just two years later in 2010, she took office as mayor. Strickland became the second African American, first Asian American, and second woman to hold that office. She served as mayor for eight years. She is now president of the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce.

In January 2018, Victoria Woodards became Tacoma’s third African American and third female mayor. Mayor Woodards grew up in Tacoma and attended Lincoln High School. She then served in the Army at Fort Lewis. She has served her community in many ways. Mayor Woodards was president of the Tacoma Urban League and was a city councilwoman.