

FIGHT FOR EQUALITY

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"If I could teach one thing to the next generation, it would be that no one should accept the status quo." These wise words by the first African Canadian Mayor, Dr. Daurene Lewis, explain exactly what this generation can learn from the accomplishments of African Canadian History. Since slavery was abolished in Canada in 1833, African Canadians still faced discrimination and limitations due to their race. With persistence and determination, African Canadians over the past 150 years have helped shape the country into what it is today. The young generation of today's society can learn from their passion, determination and resiliency to create equality. Learning from their achievements and contributions of African Canadians such as Viola Desmond and Hugh Barnett, today's youth can teach future generations to strive for what they believe in.

Viola Desmond, an African Canadian business woman, shows passion, determination and resiliency for equality. On November 8th 1946, after having car trouble in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, Desmond decided to go to the local movie theater. She bought a ticket, entered the movie theater and sat on the main floor. Unaware black Canadians were only allowed to sit on the balcony; Desmond was dragged out of the theater by the police. She was brought overnight to jail where she was charged with a twenty-dollar fine. Desmond was also brought to court for defrauding the government of Nova Scotia for the once-cent price difference between the main floor ticket and the balcony seat ticket. Not agreeing with the charge, Desmond decided to fight against it.

In court, the issue of race was not mentioned; however Desmond knew that the issue was about segregation. Desmond had the support of the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NSAAC) and other community members in her fight for equality. After the court ruled against Desmond, the NSAAC continued to fight for racial equality in Nova Scotia until 1954, when segregation was legally ended. Desmond's resiliency and determination for equality led to community support to change a province for the better.

Hugh Barnett, a carpenter in the rural town of Dresden, Ontario was an African Canadian civil rights leader who also showed determination, persistence and resiliency. In July of 1943, Barnett wrote to the federal Justice Minister Louis St. Laurent, to inform him that even in uniform, a black man could not be served in any Dresden restaurant. Shocked to get a response back from the Deputy Minister stating that racial discrimination was not illegal in Canada, Barnett fought for equality. Co-creating the National Union Association (NUA), Barnett led a campaign for racial equality and social justice. Barnett along with others lobbied and petitioned to end "whites-only" stores, restaurants and barbershops in his hometown.

Convinced that discrimination was still in effect and not supported by the general population, Barnett and the NUA developed a plan. They would ask the Dresden Town Council to pass a bylaw to make it illegal to discriminate in any business licensed by the municipality. With failure of their first attempt they continued to urge the council to create equality. After townspeople were furious over the publicity of Dresden because of Barnett's and the NUA's campaigns; Barnett received death threats in the mail. Despite these setbacks, Barnett still strived to achieve equality. On March 1954, Barnett, leading the NUA, approached the premier of Ontario. Premier Frost, inspired by Barnett's presentation agreed it was time to take action and five days later, he introduced the Fair Accommodation Practices Act (FAP).

With persistence, resiliency and determination; African Canadians such as Viola Desmond and Hugh Barnett were able to achieve their hopes and dreams. Despite setbacks and obstacles they faced, they still continued to fight. From Desmond's and Barnett's resoluteness to create equality; the youth of today can learn that despite obstacles you may face, you must be resilient to achieve your goals. Because of my values and beliefs as a student who lives a "straightedge" lifestyle, I have experienced discrimination from other students. Like Desmond and Barnett, I have overcome discrimination and continued to stand for what I believe in. Discrimination is still everywhere today, not only discrimination against race but today's youth faces discrimination with anything that does not fit inside the "societal norm". Looking at the discrimination of African Canadians over the past 150 years and how they overcame it, society can learn from their resiliency for change today to make a better tomorrow.

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