

ROSEMARY BROWN: A BLACK WOMAN WHO LEFT A LEGACY

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Life was not always fair. Today, people around the world face many injustices. In the future, everything will not be perfect. It is those who persevere and overcome obstacles who change the face of humanity, for the better. African Canadians have been and continue to be discriminated against and marginalized in this country. They have suffered through the historic practices of colonialism and encounter the present-day malpractices of police brutality. Though they face many hardships, there are numerous African Canadians who break social barriers to give back to their communities. As someone who is interested in human rights and international development, one of the people I admire is Rosemary Brown, a politician, social activist and feminist. Through her achievements and contributions to broader society, she is an ideal example of an African Canadian who has helped define Canada's diverse heritage and identity.

Rosemary Brown was born to a middle-class family in Jamaica and immigrated to Canada in 1951. A safe and supportive upbringing in her homeland did not prepare her for a xenophobic time period in Canadian history. She was treated poorly by immigration authorities, faced rejection from land lords and employers, and stayed in a private dorm in university when white students refused to share a room with her. Brown persevered and completed her undergraduate and postgraduate education in social work at McGill University and the University of British Columbia, respectively. During the 1960s, she worked as a social worker at many hospitals, and founded the British Columbia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People and the Vancouver Status of Women Council (VSW).

Though today's Cabinet displays a gender equality and cultural diversity, during this time period, individuals were advocating racial and gender representation in Canadian politics. As a black woman, she was the ideal candidate to represent both groups who faced vast amounts of discrimination. In 1972, she launched her political career by becoming a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the New Democratic Party (NDP) of British Columbia. She was first the black woman in Canadian history to be a member of a Canadian parliamentary body. As an MLA, she eliminated sexism in the province's educational material and introduced bills to eliminate discrimination based on sex and marital status. In 1975, she ran for federal leadership of the NDP, becoming the first black woman and only the second woman ever to do so in Canada. Though she finished in a close second place, her slogan "Brown in Beautiful" continues to inspire black Canadians to persevere and aim high. After successfully spending sixteen years in provincial legislature, Brown retired from her political career in 1988.

She shifted her focus to international advocacy as she became CEO of MATCH International Women's Fund, m1organization which focuses on political, economic and social advancement of women in developing countries. In 1991, she became the founding member of the Canadian Women's foundation. In 1993. Brown became the chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and held this position until 1996, while being an ambassador and then the president of MATCH.

Brown was deservedly awarded numerous national and international distinctions for her substantial efforts to eliminate racism and sexism in Canada. A few of these recognitions include 15 doctorates from Canadian Universities, the Order of British Columbia in 1995, the Order of Canada in 1996 and the United Nations' Human Rights Fellowship in 1973. She recalled the difficult situations she faced, which shaped her battle for equality, by saying, "To be black and female in a society which is both racist and sexist is to be in the unique position of having nowhere to go but up." Brown died of a heart attack on April 26, 2003 at the age of 72.

Brown's legacy continues to inspire Canadians to obtain racial and gender equality. My ideal profession is similar to hers: fight against discrimination and develop remote communities. As an immigrant like Brown, I am motivated to break social norms and succeed as a member of a visible minority in this country. Her accomplishments inspire me to believe that dedication is the key to change, no matter how difficult the circumstances may seem. From a 20-year-old who was rejected as a roommate to an influential position who fought for racial and gender equality, Brown's tireless efforts have defined Canada's diverse heritage and identity.

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