

# PARDON ME! HEROISM IN THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL EQUALITY - VIOLA DESMOND

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\$500 Winner

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When I think about our great land of Canada and how black Canadians have helped to define Canada’s diverse heritage and identity through their achievements and contributions, which ultimately benefits the broader society, I can’t help but think about Viola Desmond. Desmond’s fight for justice in our once segregated nation challenged prejudicial-based norms and laws so that life would be better for those who came after her. She was a black beautician, entrepreneur and proponent for racial equality.

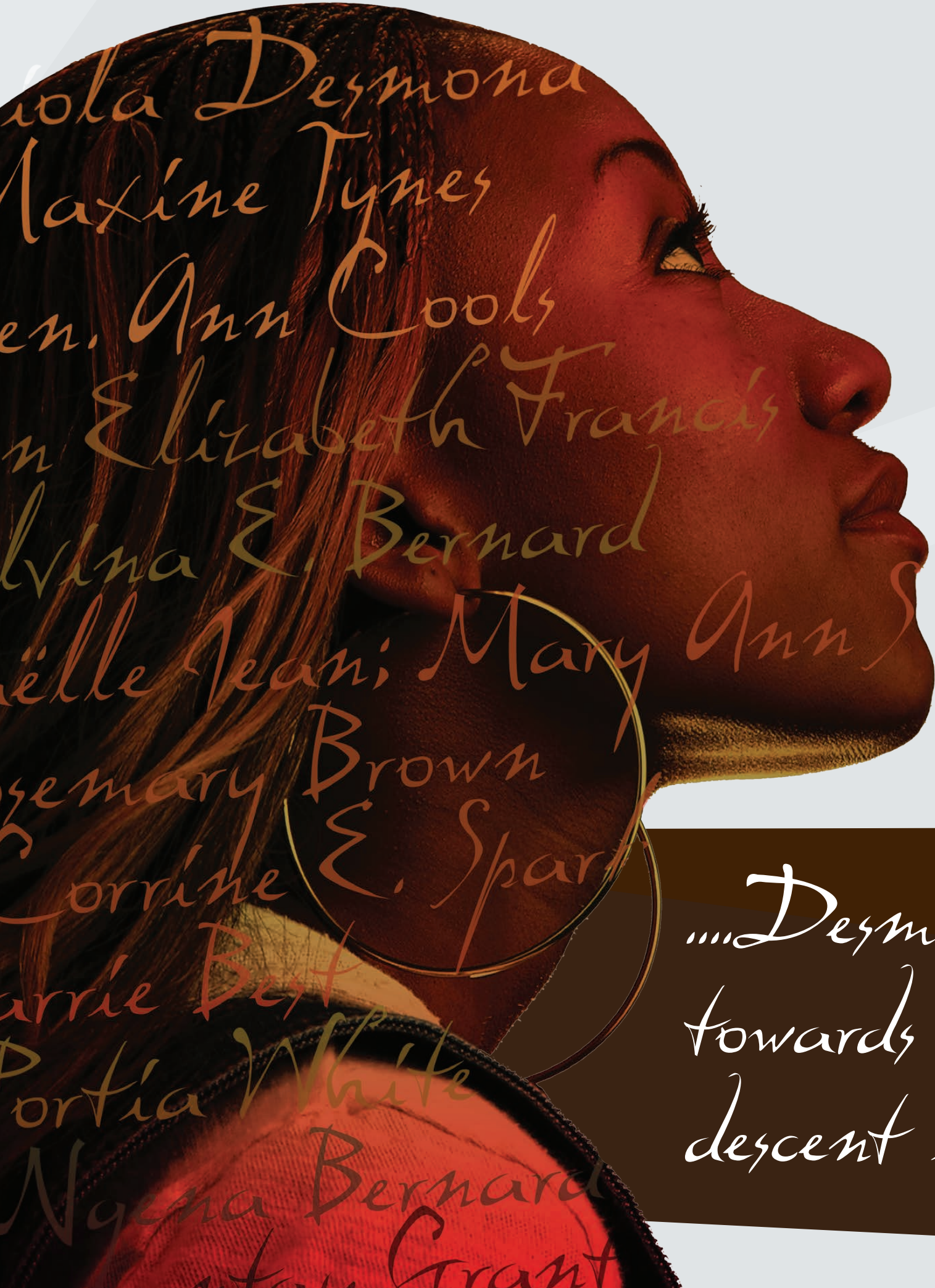
Imagine being manhandled, thrown in jail and charged for defrauding the Provincial Government of one cent? Well, in 1946, on the eve of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, a well-established and reputable black Canadian beautician and business woman from Halifax, Nova Scotia found herself in this very situation.

On November 8th, 1946 while travelling to Sydney, NS on a business trip to sell her line of hair and skin care products, Desmond experienced car trouble in New Glasgow, NS. In order to pass the time while her car was repaired, she decided to go to the Roseland Theatre to watch a movie. After paying for her movie ticket, she proceeded to her seat in the lower portion of the theatre. She was soon approached by the theatre staff advising her that she was not permitted to sit in the lower part of the theatre, and that her ticket was for the balcony. Not realizing at the time that the theatre practiced Jim Crow laws and that the balcony was racially segregated, Desmond returned to the ticket counter to fix her ticket to the lower portion of the theatre. She was advised at that point that her kind were only permitted to sit in the balcony. Totally shocked and with a spirit of resilience, Desmond returned to the lower portion of the theatre and again took her seat. The manager of the theatre and a police officer physically removed Desmond from the theatre, paying no regard to her belongings left behind or that they injured her hip. Desmond was placed in jail for the night. With her gloves on and maintaining her perfect poise, Desmond sat up in her cell the entire night. The next morning, not advised of her rights or given proper counsel, she attended a private prosecution hearing. Desmond was found guilty of defrauding the Province of Nova Scotia of one cent of the Amusement Tax because it cost .40 cents for a ticket for downstairs, and .30 for an upstairs ticket - the difference in tax between the two prices was one cent. The judge charged her with tax evasion - over one cent! Her fine was \$20 plus an additional \$6 for court costs.

When Desmond returned to Halifax, she gained the support of a number of prominent black leaders and organizations such as the NSAACP to appeal her case; but due to the laws of the day which were very much ‘black or white’ the decision was upheld. Desmond carried her disheartenment until she passed away on February 7, 1965.

Desmond’s story lived on after her passing. It was evident that the real reason for why Viola Desmond was charged had nothing to do with tax evasion, but everything to do with the fact that she was black woman who challenged the racially segregated seating policy which existed at the Roseland Theatre. This racial segregation not only existed at the theatre, but blatantly spilled over throughout the criminal justice system that she was exposed to (i.e. police, court proceedings).

It was not until 2010, that Viola Desmond received her due when The Honorable Mayann Francis, Lieutenant Governor for the Province of NS granted her a posthumous pardon declaring her innocent of wrong doing. Desmond’s family, on her behalf, received a public apology from the Premier of Nova Scotia for the racial discrimination that she received at the hands of the Province. Between 2012 and 2014, Canada Post created a stamp and provincial day was enacted to honor Desmond’s contribution to Canadian society. Referred to some as Canada’s Rosa Parks, Desmond’s stand to eliminate racial inequality and segregation would precede the famous Rosa Parks’ experience on the bus. I am inspired to know that Desmond’s efforts may have started the charge towards civil rights for all people of African descent in Nova Scotia, Canada and the United States. Viola Desmond’s legacy will forever live on in the hearts and minds of all Canadians.



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