

## Defying Convention: The Life and Legacy of Pauli Murray

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Anna Pauline “Pauli” Murray (1910 – 1985) was a same gender loving African-American feminist, lawyer, civil rights activist, poet, and Episcopal priest who found herself at the crossroads of all of the important social movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her life story reveals the monumental ways those movements transformed America.

Murray was a tireless human rights champion who as Eleanor Holmes Norton suggested, “lived on the edge of history seeming to pull it along with her.” In the 1930 and 40s, she challenged racial segregation in education and public transit. In the 1950s and 1960s, she challenged the Civil Rights Movement to recognize the accomplishments of women and the double discrimination that minority women face. As a lawyer, policy analyst and legal scholar she defied convention by stubbornly carving out her place in a male dominated profession. And in the 1970s she took on the church, confronting the gender-based policies that limited roles open to women.

The Pauli Murray Project was founded in 2009 to keep her spirit alive and ensure her place in history. Located in Durham North Carolina we are an initiative of the Duke Human Rights Center at the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute. Through community dialogues, educational and artistic programs, we lift up her life and legacy and continue her work for social justice. We are also working to save and renovate Pauli Murray's childhood home as a center for history and social justice activism. Please consider supporting our work: [www.paulimurrayproject.org](http://www.paulimurrayproject.org)

Pauli Murray's story starts in Durham where she was raised by her grandparents and aunts after her mother died. Her mixed race family included both slaves and slave owners, African Americans, whites and American Indians. Her ambition led her to Hunter College in New York City during the Depression where she was active in the labor movement, the arts scene and the civil rights struggle. On the personal side, "Anna Pauline" became "Pauli" at this point in her life and she sought medical treatment, including hormone therapy, to help her resolve her struggles with her sexual preference and gender identity. She was drawn to "male" pursuits and she experimented with living fully as a woman who preferred to dress as a man, love other women, and fight for justice without regard to society's expectations. She would pay the consequences during post-war McCarthyism.

Murray continuously worked against various kinds of segregation and exclusion, though she did not set out to be a lawyer. In 1939 she applied to attend graduate school in Sociology at the University of North Carolina. She was rejected because they did not accept African-Americans. A few years later she was arrested in Virginia for sitting in the whites only seats on a bus. The next year Murray became a key leader in a campaign to save Odell Waller, a sharecropper convicted of murdering his landowner, and sentenced to death by an all-white jury. After he was executed, she went to Howard Law School with the single-minded intention of bringing down Jim Crow. She graduated near the top of her class and earned a prestigious post-graduate fellowship.

Murray never backed down. After Harvard rejected her for graduate work because the University did not admit women, she completed her L.L.M. at U.C. Berkeley in 1945. Her master's thesis, "The Right to Equal Opportunity in Employment" foreshadowed much of the work that followed. She passed the California state bar in the same year.

Returning to New York, Murray struggled to find sustainable work as a black female lawyer and when no one would hire her, she opened her own law practice. Finding this difficult to sustain, Murray was hired by the Women's Division of Christian Service of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church to research laws requiring segregation. The publication in 1951 of *States' Laws on Race and Color* Murray contributed legal analysis to key civil rights cases fought by the likes of Thurgood Marshall. Following this success, she applied for but did not receive a U.S. State Department position administered by Cornell University in 1951. Her "past associations" and the shadow of McCarthyism prevailed despite letters of recommendation from Eleanor Roosevelt, Thurgood Marshall and A. Phillip Randolph. She retreated to explore her own past and to write *Proud Shoes: The story of an American Family*, a chronicle of her family's journey from slavery to citizenship published in 1956.

In part due to the success of *Proud Shoes*, Murray was hired that same year by the prestigious law firm; Paul, Weiss, Rifkin, Wharton, and Garrison where she met her partner Renee Barlow. In 1960 Murray moved to Ghana for 16 months to serve as senior lecturer at the Ghana School of Law in Accra where she co-authored a book, *The Constitution and Government of Ghana*. She returned to the U.S. to attend Yale Law School where she earned her J.S.D. in 1965, the first African American to do so. As a

part of her graduate work she co-authored “Jane Crow and the Law: Sex discrimination and Title VII,” in which she laid the groundwork for an emergent feminist jurisprudence.

When she was unable to secure a law school teaching position, Murray was commissioned to write a monograph, *Human Rights U.S.A.: 1948-1966*, for the Women’s Division of the Methodist Church. She did gain some national recognition during these years serving from 1965-1973 on the National Board of Directors for the American Civil Liberties Union and as co-counsel in the 1966 *White v. Crook* case which successfully eliminated the use of sex and race discrimination in jury selection. In 1966 Murray joined with Betty Friedan and others to found the National Organization for Women and she was also invited to join President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women’s Political and Civil Rights committee where she was one of the first people to advocate an agenda that recognized black women’s double discrimination. After another difficult search for work, Murray finally secured full-time employment as a professor in the American Studies program at Brandeis University from 1968-1973.

When her life partner passed away in 1973, Pauli Murray found herself in crisis. She’d lost both Renee and Aunt Pauline, the woman who raised her. Like both of them, Pauli was a life long Episcopalian. She was both drawn to and disappointed by her church and its limited roles for women. After a lifetime spent fighting for change in the worlds of law and politics, she began to view the challenges of human rights as moral and spiritual problems and was drawn to opportunities for religious leadership. She resigned her tenured position and enrolled in divinity school to pursue the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. The struggle for ordination of women was finally settled in 1976 by a vote at the General Convention. In January 1977, Pauli Murray became the first officially ordained African American female Episcopal priest. She served in several ministries and wrote numerous sermons and essays that reflected her life long advocacy for all people in the cause of freedom. She retired to work on her autobiography and in 1985 died of pancreatic cancer in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The autobiography, *Song in a Weary Throat*, was published posthumously.

While Pauli Murray was never, to our knowledge, a very public member of the LGBTQ community, she left behind diaries, journals and correspondence in her extensive collection of personal papers that offer insight and evidence of her struggle to find her place at the intersection of all of her identities and to craft an integrated life and sense of wholeness.

We are finally catching up to Pauli Murray. Her ideas, arguments, strategies and powerful writings resonate with the issues of today. We continue to struggle with racism, sexism, and homophobia and the overlapping oppressions experience by people who claim multiple identities. In the law, policy development, and activist spheres the intersections of these issues continue to fracture freedom struggles. New scholarship in the fields of sexuality studies, law, history, literature, women’s studies, and religious studies is just beginning to address these issues more directly and Pauli Murray’s life and work provide a guiding light to these efforts.



### Pauli Murray Project Mission

The Pauli Murray Project envisions communities that actively work toward fairness and justice across the divisions such as race, class, sexual & gender identity and spiritual practice that often divide us. We embrace the transformative power of collecting and telling our stories and our truths as a process that heals these wounds and promotes human rights. More information: [www.paulimurrayproject.com](http://www.paulimurrayproject.com)

### Books and Articles by Pauli Murray

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