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1999 The Portland Observer

Celebrating National Women's History Month

~ Gwendolyn Brooks ~

(Poet, Literary) 1917-2000

BY FELICIA SLIDER THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

To having her first poem published when she was 14, to being the first black poet to win the Pulitzer Prize for her collection of poems, the late south side of Chicago where her parents moved when she was less than one year old, her vision must have been quite clear.



Gwendolyn Brooks
American poet Gwendolyn Brooks was the first African American to receive a Pulitzer Prize. She won the prize in 1950 for her poetry collection *Annie Allen*.

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks contributions to literature and poetry made her an inspiration to many.

Was this because she grew up as an introverted and shy child, who grew up reading the Harvard classics and the poems of the late Black poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Maybe, but as the late Brooks stated,

"I am interested in telling my particular truth as I have seen it."

Shy then, maybe yes. But when Gwendolyn Brooks started to see the truth on the

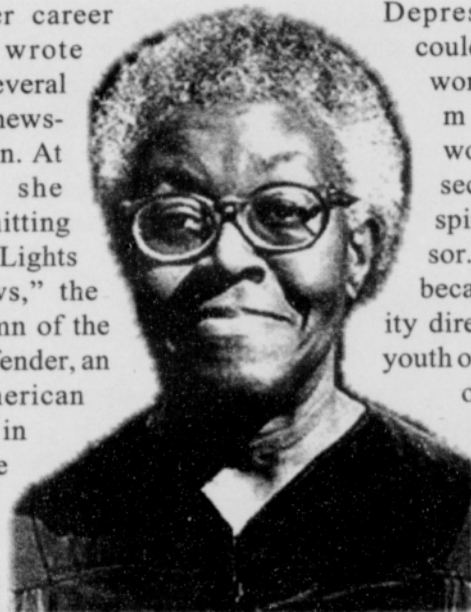
"I wrote about what I saw and heard on the street," she said of her first volume published in 1945, titled *A Street in Bronzeville*.

Gwendolyn Brooks, the daughter of David Anderson Brooks, the son of a runaway slave, and of Keziah Corinne (Wims) Brooks, was born on June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas. At the age of one month,

Gwendolyn Brooks was brought home to Chicago, where she has lived for her entire life.

In 1932, she entered Hyde Park High School, which was predominantly white; she later attended Wendell Phillips High School, which was all-black, and Englewood High School, an integrated institution. While still a student, she met the poets James Weldon Johnson—who suggested that she read such modern poets as T. S. Eliot and E. E. Cummings—and Langston Hughes, who encouraged her in her literary ambi-

tions, and who would offer more tangible assistance early in her career when he wrote about her several times in his newspaper column. At seventeen, she began submitting her work to "Lights and Shadows," the poetry column of the Chicago Defender, an African-American newspaper, in which she would publish more than seventy-five poems. She graduated from Wilson Junior College in 1936.



Graduating from Wilson Junior College during the Depression, she could only find work as a domestic worker and as secretary to a spiritual advisor. Later, she became publicity director of the youth organization of the NAACP in Chicago. She continued writing and by the end of the early 1940's her poetry was appearing in Harp-

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