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COURAGEOUS

AFRICAN AMERICANS



by Ron Weber

Black Women Excel at Law

As one of only a handful of American women and certainly the only one who was black, Mary Ann Shadd Cary had earned the right to square off with some of the most powerful white male attorneys in the country.

Cary was the first woman to attend the Howard University Law School. She also became the first black woman to cast a vote in a national election and the first woman to speak at a national black convention.

Although Cary found remarkable success, it did not come easy. Her childhood poverty forced her to succeed slowly. She did not make it into the Law Program at Howard until she was 41. Prior to that she had been a teacher, principal, writer, advocate and publisher.

As if she had not faced enough discrimination in her life, was not allowed a diploma after passing the bar at the time of her graduation.

Fearing that a woman graduate (especially a black one) would cause great negative publicity, Cary's Law Degree diploma was withheld for 10



Mary Ann Shadd Cary

years. Howard University administrators feared reprisals from powerful wealthy white male lawyers and politicians.

Only during the last 12 years of her life was Cary allowed to perform legal work. Until her death in 1893 at the age of 70, she fought many legal challenges including those involving women's rights and suffrage.

Another courageous fighter who challenged America's early legal machinery was Charlotte E. Ray. Fearing denial to admittance to Howard Law School, Charlotte simply filled out an application and

mailed it to the college, signing it "C.E. Ray."

Not expecting a woman to show up, Howard was only too happy to accept the application and tuition money. By the time what happened was discovered, the school decided to let it go and see what would happen. As it turned out, Ray was an excellent student and Howard began slowly accepting black women law students after that.

Still, it would be decades before any real change took place in allowing women of any color into most of the nation's law colleges. While some colleges and universities accepted them into the law program, they were often taunted and harassed through their entire program. And once African American women graduated from law school it was extremely hard for them to find work. The courts were generally reserved for men even as late as the mid-20th century.

Ray advertised her services in the "New Nation Era and Citizen" and relied on word of mouth to bring her business. She also be-

came the first woman of any color to specialize in Corporate Law.

She was a dynamic role model in teaching and civil rights issues. While sources are a little unclear regarding the exact date of her death, most say that Ray died in 1911 at the age of 60.

Both these women cleared the path for other black lawyers to come. Between 1896 and the end of the World War II, 35 women graduated from the Howard Law School campus. During the 1920s, enough African-American women law students were enrolled to form the Epsilon Sigma Iota Sorority. This is believed to be the first black sorority formed anywhere in the world.

All through our country's early history, women have had to forcibly challenge a system controlled by men. Whether it was becoming a lawyer, a politician, obtaining the right to vote or learning how to fly an airplane, the undefeatable spirit of America's women and African American women has always shined through.

Ron Weber is a writer and speaker on African American history and a regular contributor to the Portland Observer.

Striving for Impact

continued ▲ from Front

"I've been asked why I was appointed, and I don't think it's because I'm a woman, but I think it didn't hurt, either," she said.

Sizer said increasing the numbers of African Americans on the 944-member force is one of her priorities. Currently 42 officers or 4.2 percent of Portland police are black.

Portland has had difficulty recruiting African American officers, regardless of who's in

charge. Sizer addresses the issue by suggesting a more relationship-based approach in recruitment beyond traditional job fairs and pamphlets.

She used to patrol the Humboldt/Boise neighborhood of north and northeast Portland, but not all officers have interracial experiences, or get any type of interracial interaction in their personal time.

She said it's important to give officers a chance to interact with the community outside of 911 calls.

"For years officers have been expected to make partnerships, but I honestly don't think that's concrete enough," she said. "I'm looking for people to step forward so we can establish specific relationships."

She also suggests officers, especially

those new to Portland, should understand the history of neighborhoods like the World War II housing projects of Vanport and Columbia Villa, which have shaped what the city is today.

"That's why it's important to facilitate this," Sizer said. "This should be part of the training, especially if local historians are willing to participate."

Sizer said the bureau will continue sensitivity training, and relationship-based recruitment to overcome distrust of the police.

"I've been surprised by how responsive the force has been to what I've said," she said. "I'm trying to get the message throughout the force not to be so defensive. People must find a common ground and look at things through various perspectives."

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