Vel Phillips
The Fight for Fair Housing
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Introduction

Jean Nicolet was the first European to explore Wisconsin in 1634. Electa Quinney became Wisconsin’s first public school teacher in 1828. George Poage grew up in Wisconsin and became the first African American to win a medal in the Olympic Games in 1904.

Each of these people made history. They did something first, and their firsts changed the lives of people who came after them.

Vel Phillips made history with her many firsts. For example, she was the first woman and the first African American judge in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her actions improved the lives of people in the United States (U.S.).
Early Life

Velvalea Hortense Rodgers was born on February 18, 1924. She lived with her parents and two sisters on the south side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her father, Russell, was a businessman. Her mother, Thelma, told her daughters to follow their dreams. Vel’s dream was to become a lawyer.

1940 2010

This map show how the population of African Americans living in Milwaukee changed over time.
Thelma Rodgers made the house rules. Vel and her sisters could not smoke or swear. They were expected to get a good education. Vel went to Garfield Avenue Elementary and Roosevelt Junior High. She also attended North Division High, a mostly white school. Vel graduated from high school in 1942. Afterwards, she went to Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Vel earned a college scholarship when she won a public speaking contest during high school.
Vel graduated from college in 1946. She then went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School. At a party, Vel met Dale Phillips and called it “love at first sight.” Vel and Dale secretly **eloped** in November 1947. They later had a wedding on September 12, 1948. The couple had two sons named Michael and Dale.

Vel teamed with political activists such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) members.
In 1951, Vel became the first African American woman to graduate from the law school. She moved back to Milwaukee where she saw that African American students and teachers were not treated fairly. She wanted to change this, so she ran for the Milwaukee School Board. Vel lost the election, but she did not let this discourage her. She continued to speak out for equal rights at School Board meetings.

**Civil Rights Era (1954 - 1972)**

1954

In a case called Brown vs. the Board of Education, the US Supreme Court rules that it is illegal to have segregation in schools.

1955

Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the white section of a bus.

1956

The U.S. Supreme Court rules that segregation on buses is illegal.

1962

Malcolm X becomes a civil rights leader. He encourages people to gain equal rights by any means possible, including violence.

1963

Martin Luther King, Jr. gives a speech called “I Have a Dream,” and more than 200,000 people march on Washington, D.C. in support of civil rights.

1964

President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act, preventing discrimination in employment, voting, and education.

1966

Kwanzaa becomes a holiday. It is a week-long celebration that honors African heritage in African American culture.

1967

Thurgood Marshall becomes the first African American Supreme Court Justice.

1968

Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated.

1972

Shirley Chisholm becomes the first African American and first Democratic woman to run for President of the United States.
Vel made history again in 1956. She became the first woman and the first African American elected to the Milwaukee Common Council. Vel worked hard to pass laws that treated all people fairly. She worked on clean air laws for Milwaukee. She also took part in national civil rights events such as the 1963 March on Washington.

Vel Phillips became famous for her role in the fight for fair housing in Milwaukee. People of color could not buy or rent houses in some parts of the city. In 1962, she introduced the Phillips Housing Ordinance to make housing discrimination illegal in Milwaukee. The Common Council voted it down, but Vel would not take no for an answer. She presented the bill three more times between 1963 and 1967. It was defeated each time.

The March on Washington was one of the largest political rallies in United States history.
Vel was determined to stop housing discrimination. She showed her support for the cause when she walked with Father James Groppi and hundreds of young people in a peaceful march across Milwaukee’s 16th Street Bridge in 1967. She and 137 other people were arrested a few weeks later for their actions. But that didn’t stop Vel. More marches and protests followed. The Common Council finally passed the Fair Housing Law on April 30, 1968, six years after Vel first proposed it.
Vel resigned from the Common Council in 1971. Wisconsin’s governor then made her judge of the Milwaukee Children’s Court. This made her the first woman judge in Milwaukee and the first African American judge in Wisconsin.

Vel went on to become the first woman and first African American elected secretary of state in Wisconsin. As secretary of state, she served as governor when the top officials left the state. Vel jokingly said that “the men hurried back” once they realized they had left a woman in charge of the state.
Vel’s husband Dale died unexpectedly from a heart attack on April 14, 1988. This loss hurt her deeply, but Vel continued to assist others. She helped Gwendolynne Moore become Wisconsin’s first African American and second female Congresswoman. She also volunteered to help build a statue in Milwaukee of Joshua Glover, an escaped slave.

Vel received the Robert and Belle Case La Follette Award for Distinction in Public Service in 2006.

Courtesy of Marquette University.

Vel earned an honorary degree from Marquette University on May 20, 2007.
That year, she also created the Vel Phillips Foundation to promote social justice, education, and equal housing.

Vel continued to give speeches to school, church, and women’s groups until her death on April 17, 2018. She sang about peace and equal rights with a group called The Raging Grannies.

Vel Phillips helped give people in the city of Milwaukee the right to live where they wanted. She opened doors that had been closed to women and African Americans. Vel’s firsts made history. More importantly, they made life better for people in Wisconsin and across the U.S.

Quotes retrieved from:
Glossary

bill (n): . . . . . . . . a proposed law; if legislators vote to pass a bill then it becomes a law

civil rights (n): . . . . . rights or privileges that all citizens of a country have according to law

discrimination (n): different treatment of people because of their race, religion, gender, etc.

election (n): . . . . the act of choosing someone by voting

elope (v): . . . . . to secretly get married

equal rights (n): . . . the same treatment for all people

Fair Housing

Law (n): . . . . . . . a law that makes it illegal to prevent people from living where they choose because of their race

governor (n): . . . . the top executive official of a state in the United States

march (n): . . . . . a rally; a group of people walking together in support of a cause

social justice (n): . . all people having the same advantages and disadvantages
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