Vel Phillips
The Fight for Fair Housing
Biography written by:

Becky Marburger
Educational Producer
Wisconsin Media Lab
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A pioneer is a person who ventures into unknown territory. Pioneers open up new areas of thought, research, or opportunity for others.

Wisconsin’s history is full of pioneers. Jean Nicolet explored Wisconsin in 1634 when it was unknown to other Europeans. Electa Quinney forged the path for public education when she became Wisconsin’s first public school teacher in 1828. George Poage opened up new opportunities for others when he became the first African American to medal in the Olympic Games in 1904.

Vel Phillips was also a pioneer. She accomplished many firsts in her life, including becoming the first woman and African American judge in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She also ventured into unknown territory when she proposed civil rights legislation in Milwaukee in the 1960s. Vel’s pioneering spirit left a mark on the history of Wisconsin and the United States (U.S.).
Born on February 18, 1924, Velvalea Hortense Rodgers lived with her parents and two sisters on the south side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her father, Russell, was a business owner who managed a restaurant and a car garage. Vel’s mother, Thelma, was the most important influence on her daughters’ lives. Vel became interested in politics after watching her mother work at the polls on election days. Thelma encouraged her daughters to pursue their dreams; Vel dreamed of becoming a lawyer. She asked her mother if this would be possible. Thelma responded, “Of course you can, honey, but it will be hard because there aren’t many women lawyers.”

This map shows how the population of African Americans living in Milwaukee changed over time.
Vel’s mother established the house rules, which included no smoking, no drinking, and no swearing. One house rule went without saying: the girls knew they were supposed to get a good education. “No one necessarily talked about attending college, it was just expected,” described Vel. She attended Garfield Avenue Elementary and Roosevelt Junior High before attending North Division High, a mostly white school. During high school, Vel won a national oratory scholarship. After her graduation in 1942, she attended Howard University in Washington, D.C.
Becoming a Lawyer

Vel graduated from college in 1946 with her Bachelor of Arts degree, and then enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School. In 1947, Vel met Dale Phillips at a party, calling it “love at first sight.” Vel and Dale secretly eloped in November 1947 while traveling in Iowa. They later had a formal wedding ceremony on September 12, 1948. The couple had two sons named Michael and Dale.

In 1951, Vel became the first African American woman to graduate from the law school. Thurgood Marshall, a U.S. Supreme Court judge and civil rights advocate, once gave her the following advice: “All lawyers, especially African-American lawyers, have a special responsibility to make the world a better place.” She took his words to heart and made this her goal.

Vel teamed with political activists such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) members.
Vel started to make a difference in the political arena when she moved back to Milwaukee. She ran for the School Board to advocate equal rights for African American students and teachers. Though she lost the race, she was the first black candidate to make it past the primary election. Vel continued to publicly challenge the School Board’s policies. She also became active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) because she wanted to help increase political representation for African Americans.

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.
Milwaukee Common Council

Vel made history again when she became the first woman and the first African American elected to Milwaukee’s Common Council in 1956. She gained national prominence as the first African American national committee member for the Wisconsin Democratic Party. In this role, she promoted civil rights and school integration based on the Brown vs. Board of Education court case that prohibited “separate but equal” schools.

During the 1960s, Vel participated in numerous nonviolent protests against discrimination in housing, education, and employment. She attended national events such as the 1963 March on Washington. Vel bravely voiced her opinion against segregation in Milwaukee schools. She also called for cleaner air in Milwaukee and for the right for women to use indoor swimming pools on Saturdays.

This pioneer is most notably recognized for her role in obtaining fair housing rights for people of color in Milwaukee. In 1962, she introduced the Phillips Housing Ordinance to make housing discrimination illegal. The Common Council voted it down.

Vel would not be defeated. She proposed the bill three more times between 1963 and 1967. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported, “Seventeen white Milwaukee aldermen listened silently for 30 minutes Tuesday while their lone
Negro colleague urged them to consider the adoption of a city fair housing ordinance. Then, without a word of comment or criticism, they voted to reject the proposal” (June 14, 1967).

Vel’s vigor propelled her forward. She refused to take no for an answer. During the summer of 1967, she joined with Milwaukee’s NAACP and Father James Groppi, a civil rights activist, to march across the city’s 16th Street Bridge. Vel and 137 people were later arrested for their peaceful demonstration for fair housing. Their determination finally paid off. On April 30, 1968, two weeks after Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination, the Common Council passed the **Fair Housing Law**. After six long years of struggle, Vel’s ordinance gave all people the right to live wherever they wanted.
POLITICAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Vel still wanted to do more. In 1971, she left the Common Council, and Wisconsin Governor Patrick Lucey appointed 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. In this role, she served as acting governor when the top officials left the state. Vel jokingly stated that “the men hurried back” once they realized they had left a woman in charge of Wisconsin. This position also made her the highest-ranking woman in state government in the U.S.

(from left to right) Governor Lee Sherman Dreyfus, Lieutenant Governor Russell Olsen, Secretary of State Vel Phillips, Treasurer Charles Smith, Superintendent of Public Instruction Barbara Thompson, and Attorney General Bronson La Follette
Tragedy struck when Vel’s husband, Dale, died unexpectedly from a heart attack on April 14, 1988. The loss of her husband hurt her deeply, but Vel carried on. She ran Gwendolynne Moore’s campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives, helping Moore become Wisconsin’s first African American and second female Congressional representative.

Vel was active in her local community until her death on April 17, 2018. She volunteered on a committee to help construct a statue in Milwaukee of Joshua Glover, an escaped slave. In 2006, she created the Vel Phillips Foundation to support people and projects focused on social justice, education, and equal housing. That same year, she received the Robert and Belle Case La Follette Award for Distinction in Public Service.

Vel earned an honorary degree from Marquette University on May 20, 2007.
Vel Phillips was a pioneer in law, politics, women’s rights and civil rights. Her many firsts helped pave the pathway for others. Vel made history, and her actions impacted the way many U.S. citizens live their lives today.

In 2011, the University of Wisconsin-Madison named a dormitory Phillips Hall in recognition of her accomplishments. Vel gave speeches to school, church, and women’s groups. She sang about peace, economic and social justice, and the environment with a group called *The Raging Grannies*.

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Quotes retrieved from:
Miner, Barbara. “Valiant Lady Vel.”
Milwaukee Magazine. 08 11 2007: n. page.
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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