

Vel Philips



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On February 18th, 1924, Velvlea Rodgers was born on the South Side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She attended North Davidson High School; she was an excellent student so she graduated earning a scholarship to attend Howard University. She would graduate from Howard University with a bachelor's of arts degree in 1946. In 1947 Phillips would meet Mr. Dale Phillips, the man she would eventually marry before they both enrolled into Wisconsin–Madison Law School. Vel Phillips would graduate from Wisconsin-Madison Law School in 1951 making her the first African-American woman to earn a law degree from that institution. Both Dale and Vel Phillips would move to Milwaukee and become the first husband and wife to be admitted to the Wisconsin Bar. Vel Phillips would try her hand at becoming an elected official; she ran for a seat on the school board of the Milwaukee public schools in 1953 and made it past the non-partisan citywide primary election. She would lose in the run-off but she was beginning to make her mark.

Vel and Dale Phillips both joined the Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP and also became active in their community. At the time there had been no African-Americans to serve on the Common Counsel in Milwaukee. History was made once again when Vel Phillips became the first woman and the first African-American to serve on the Common Counsel in Milwaukee. Her new title was Madame Alderman Vel Phillips; even though she was a pioneer it would be many years to come before another African-American would serve on the Common Counsel. Vel Phillips became a voice for the district of Milwaukee she represented which was called the “Inner Core.” The inner

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core was the African-American part of town that endured failing schools, poor living conditions, little to no representation, no jobs, and blacks could barely gain housing outside of the inner core. Vel became active in the non-violent civil rights protest during the 1960's, and in 1962 she used her elected position to propose a Fair Housing Law to outlaw housing discrimination. In 1968 after a federal anti-discrimination law was passed Phillips' Fair Housing Law was passed making any form of housing discrimination illegal.

In 1967 a riot broke out in Milwaukee where black houses and establishments were fire bombed by white rioters, the aftermath of the riot revealed four people were dead and Vel Phillips was arrested. The summer of 1967 was labeled the "long hot summer nationally because of the racism the African-Americans were facing. Also in 1967, Phillips began marching in protest for the rights of African-Americans with Father James Groppi. They would lead up to 200 people marching from the Inner Core to South Milwaukee as angry whites spewed racial slurs and threw objects at them. Phillips would serve on the Common Counsel from 1956 until 1971 when she resigned to yet again make history by becoming the first woman and African-American to be appointed to the judiciary of Wisconsin. She did not serve a second term due to her opponent using her activism as a means to say she was not judicial material.

She would go on to become a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and she would also serve as a law professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School. In 1978 Phillips became the first woman and first non-white person to be elected as the Secretary of State in Wisconsin. She would briefly serve as the acting Governor of Wisconsin during the absence of the Governor and the Lieutenant Governor. Phillips also became the highest ranking woman to hold an office in the state of Wisconsin in the 20th century. Phillips has served on the boards of both the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music and America's Black Holocaust Museum. Marquette University's School of Law named her "Distinguished Professor of Law." She was the chair of the campaign which produced Milwaukee, Wisconsin's first African-American and first female member of the United States House of Representatives, Gwen Moore. In 2006 she founded the Vel Phillis Foundation to help African-Americans gain social and civil justice. It has been stated that Phillips is currently in the production stages of a first-person memoir of the civil rights movement in Milwaukee. She used her talents and relentlessness to help change the landscape for African-Americans in Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin. Miss. Vel Phillips, we proudly stand on your shoulders.

J.A. Ward.

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