The Fight for Racial Justice in WV through its Black Women

By Janetta Keel

Despite common misbeliefs of only ever being a predominately white populated and involved state, West Virginia has a deep African American history. African American men and women in West Virginia have been very resilient through their many injustices over the years, including enslavement, unequal civil rights, and daily prejudice. Even through these cruelties, these black individuals have prevailed in many unique ways. The most astonishing but also least acknowledged are the accomplishments of black West Virginian women. These women have made several historical and current changes to civil rights ranging from political involvement to creative arts to education. However, these achievements are infrequently discussed or even known by the masses. Due to the whitewashing and removal of their history and the conditions of the current black female leaders, complete racial justice in West Virginia, especially for females, remains undiscovered.

Following the civil war and the ratification of the thirteenth amendment, slavery was abolished, but the need to fight for racial equality was not. Almost a century following, segregation and extreme prejudice were common not only to West Virginians, but any resident of the U.S. in the 1930s. Mathematician and NASA employee, Katherine Johnson, helped to lessen this issue. She was hand selected, along with two other students, by the WV president to integrate West Virginia's graduate school in 1939. (Shetterly). Johnson was also an educator prior to working at NASA in the 1950s. With her extreme knowledge and perseverance, she was able to change the negative image of black women in West Virginia and helped remove the segregation in her workplace (Sanders).

In addition to education, black women in West Virginia have been able to make a more equal racial environment through politics. Minnie Buckingham Harper, who was the wife of E. Howard Harper, was the first African American woman to be involved in WV legislature. She was appointed by Governor Howard Gore in January of 1928 to finish out her husband's term after he passed ("WV's First African American Female Legislator"). The writers of the WV Encyclopedia state that, "Her appointment reflected both the growing importance of women in American politics and the large voting bloc[k] of African Americans in southern West Virginia," and this is accurate because in 1950, Elizabeth Simpson Drewry became the first elected black woman to serve in West Virginia legislature ("Elizabeth Simpson Drewry"). Drewry was able to "...[chair] both the Military Affairs and Health committees and served on the Judiciary, Education, Labor and Industry, Counties, Districts and Municipalities, Humane Institutions, and Mining committees," and she supported and advanced legislation that removed female discrimination in juries ("Elizabeth Simpson Drewry").

More currently in the political realm, in 2018, Danielle Walker became a member of the WV House of Delegates. ("Danielle Walker"). She is an advocator of black equality and has shown her support through her attendance at peaceful Black Lives Matter (BLM) rallies and sponsoring a bill commonly known as the CROWN act to end hair discrimination in workplaces. ("WV House of Delegates"). Despite her progressive attitudes and positive mindset that "you can't silence love", her actions were not all well received. After being invited by Preston County local activist Frank Goines, Walker attended and helped with a peaceful protest on September 12 of last year in Kingwood, West Virginia, but this rally was not the perfect example of peace due to the actions and words of counter protesters in attendance (Jones and Wright). Although there

was no violence, many counter protesters were armed and used racial slurs towards Walker and other black protesters. Additionally, on the day of the BLM march in Kingwood, Walker had to wear protective body armor due to the threatened violence from them.
(Jones and Wright). Quoted from Walker herself, “The body armor started on September 12, and it hasn’t stopped. The threats come every time a news article comes. A threat comes every time I participate in a protest, march or even a vigil, the threat comes if someone writes an opinion editorial about me in the newspaper.” (Jones and Wright) Although several white West Virginians are not in support of Walker’s ideas for racial justice, she has still been able to leave an impact in her community in Monongalia County with her activism.

Some more praiseworthy figures like Danielle Walker, are the creative black women of WV. Dorris Anne Fields, better known as Lady D, was one of the first West Virginian women to create R&B, soul, and blues music (WV Folklife). Founded in Beckley, WV, she started her own band and has been involved in music ever since she was a child, yet she still is not widely recognized like other West Virginian musicians are today. This cannot be due to a lack of skill because in 2008, “[her] original song ‘Go Higher’ won an online contest sponsored by the Obama Music Arts and Entertainment Group.” (WV Folklife). As of 2020, Fields still is performing blues music and has begun to combine her performances with poetry and storytelling (Bays), so why isn’t her name more familiar to everyone? Bays also points out that “[f]or many years, Fields has been one of the hardest-working women in southern West Virginia's music scene, and certainly one of the region's most outspoken advocates for blues, jazz and soul music.” To deepen the racial equality in West Virginia, more artists like Fields need to be recognized.

Racism is in the roots of the U.S., but throughout the years, West Virginian black women have been able to help in the fight for justice. Katherine Johnson was able to push through criticism and discrimination to use her mathematical skills to help NASA perform highly, and Minnie Buckingham Harper and Simpson Drewry were able to make history by being the first black women to serve in the West Virginia legislature. Harper and Drewry's accomplishments allowed for other black West Virginian girls to grow up and have the courage to reach their goals; Danielle Walker was able to become the first delegate of WV. Lastly, Dorris Fields was able to reach new musical heights as a blues artist in West Virginia. Despite the great changes and advancements made by these women, the harsh reality remains that many individuals are still against equal civil rights in West Virginia. Complete racial justice will not be found until more people outside of the African American community come together to push for equality too.

(NOTE: This essay was the first place winner in the Berkeley County NAACP "Racial Justice: Fact or Fiction Contest.")

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