

Diligence and Hope: The Story of Viola Coleman

Jennifer Klein

11th Grade

Lee Senior High School

Diligence and Hope: The Story of Viola Coleman

Martin Luther King, Jr. once proclaimed, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Regrettably, there is a tendency among people to give in and acquiesce in times of adversity. Most resign themselves to simply go along with the status quo, and tacitly accept the injustice they face. However, Viola Coleman was not like most people. A determined woman, she set upon a course to earn civil rights for her people, and in the process she forever altered the status quo of Midland, Texas.

Born in New Iberia, Louisiana, Viola Coleman acquired an interest in the field of medicine at an early age. Miss Lane, the public county nurse in the town, was the embodiment of altruism and benevolence, and Coleman yearned to emulate these characteristics. Coleman resolved to go to medical school, regardless of the fact that there were very few African American women in the profession (Ott). In 1946, she applied to Louisiana State University, and sparked a chain of events that would alter her life as well as the civil rights movement. On June 23, Coleman worriedly opened a letter from the university, and to her dismay found that she was denied admission to the school (Helm). Even more upsetting was the fact that Louisiana State University had not rejected Coleman on the basis of her academic merit, but instead, on the basis of her skin color. The president of the LSU board of supervisors, McLemore, had bluntly written in the letter, “As you no doubt know, the State of Louisiana maintains separate schools for its white and colored students. Southern University, located in Scotlandsville, in East Baton Rouge Parish, La., is the principle Louisiana university for negroes”(Johnson). Whereas many African Americans at the time would have settled for the Southern University, Coleman was discontent with that decision. She soon sent a letter to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, in hopes that they would be able to aid her in this matter. Daniel E.

Byrd, the executive secretary of the organization, promptly replied that, “We consider it a privilege to assist you in this manner”(Byrd, May 1946). Several months later, the 19th district court in Louisiana heard her case. Unfortunately, it can be deduced that Coleman lost the case, judging from articles proclaiming, “Iberia Negress Loses Court Suit to Attend LSU”(Helm). She considered pressing the matter further by bringing the case to a court of appeals, but soon veered from that path when death threats were made against her family. Her son Conrad Coleman explained that it just wasn’t worth it to her to put her family in danger in order to attend a school. Instead, the State of Louisiana and the Louisiana Colored Teacher’s Association helped to fund Coleman’s education at Meharry Medical College in Nashville (Longe). After her ordeals with the court were unsuccessfully completed, Byrd from the NAACP sent one last piece of correspondence which stated, “Only a handful of our people want integration and it is God’s valiant minority who must wage war on these insidious evils”(Byrd 1948). It is indubitably clear that Coleman was a part of this “valiant minority” set upon modifying the status of African Americans.

Subsequently, once Coleman had graduated from Meharry Medical College, she faced the daunting prospect of starting her own practice while facing discrimination in the medical community. Returning to New Iberia, Louisiana, she asked a bank if she could borrow \$300 for her practice. The bank agreed to the loan upon one condition: that her parents would put up their home as collateral. With Jim Crow laws rampant in the South, insidious banking practices like these were something Coleman had to deal with constantly. As Conrad Coleman affirmed, “My mother could not ask her parents, in good conscience, to risk their home to set up her medical practice.” Having lost her prospects in New Iberia, Viola Coleman and her husband Raymond set out for the West Coast where they felt opportunities for blacks would be more plentiful. Their

train to California, by happenstance, stopped in the town of Midland, Texas. The couple decided to visit Midland Memorial Hospital, and Coleman inquired as to whether the hospital would give her a license to practice. In a shocking contrast to the racism faced in Louisiana, the hospital staff replied, “Why wouldn’t we give you privileges?”(Coleman). Thus, Coleman decided to stay in Midland.

Though she had overcome much discrimination in her own personal spectrum, Coleman still wished for a greater level of equality for her race. Coleman soon established her first center on 400 South Carver Street, and she began treating patients(Campbell). At that time, African American patients were generally forced to come to doctor’s offices through a back door and to wait in a separate room from whites. Coleman altered the status quo by offering the first integrated waiting room in the city. Another cause of inequity that Coleman tackled was, “moving patients of color from the basement to all floors of the hospital,” as school board member James Fuller explained in an interview. Midland Memorial Hospital had implemented a program in which only those with financial security and proper insurance could be kept on the fourth floor. Coleman confronted this discriminatory policy when she asked that black school-teacher Alma Marshall be admitted to the fourth floor. Even though Marshall had insurance, she was not permitted onto the floor, likely due to her race. Furious, Coleman interrogated the nurses as to why they perpetuated this form of segregation. Then, she promptly removed Marshall from the hospital to be sent to a private hospital instead. By Coleman’s actions, Midland Memorial Hospital’s discrimination was brought to light, and their policies were rectified (Ott).

Reflecting on Midland Memorial Hospital’s elitist “fourth-floor” procedures, Coleman began to lament the fact that those with wealth were typically the ones with the most access to proper healthcare. Coleman, always desiring equity, decided to do something about this fact.

Regardless of a patient's ability to pay, she would take them in with no questions asked. As Conrad Coleman related, "She would say, 'Let's get you better first, then we'll worry about the payment.' " Thus, as Coleman lightheartedly remarked, "There were always strangers at our house, doing yard work and various tasks to pay back my mother for her medical work." In this manner, Viola Coleman was able to take socio-economic factors out of the picture, and made healthcare accessible to anyone in Midland.

While it may seem minor, Coleman took another step toward civil rights in an unlikely place: the hospital dining room. Though both black and white employees could go through the food line, only whites were allowed to eat in the dining room. Black employees were designated to dine in a small room across the hall. This was incomprehensible to Coleman, so one day she decided to eat in the dining room. None of the white employees ate in the dining room that day. Coleman continued to sit in the dining room, day after day, until the white employees acquiesced and ate alongside her. Her seemingly trivial action had resulted in a stride toward equality and desegregation (Chandler).

Despite the fact that Viola Coleman actively championed integration within the hospital, she continued to face obstacles because of her race. Though she was as skilled and competent as any other doctor at the facility, she was excluded from joining the Emergency Medical Staff because the hospital stated that white patients would have an aversion to being treated by an African American. Worse still, she was restricted from becoming a member of the Midland County Medical Society (Sartain). This was a particularly difficult setback, since she was not able to obtain insurance coverage without membership in the association. Coleman refused to take "no" for an answer, and set resolved to integrate the Medical Society. Her diligent efforts were successful, and as luck would have it, she became the president of the organization in 1975.

On a different note, it must be observed that Viola Coleman's work extended far beyond the medical spectrum. Ever since her struggle with LSU, she had made equity in education a priority. With a teacher for a husband, and two young boys, she was especially invested in the realm of learning. Her efforts started out small. Whenever young people would come to her office, she'd set aside time to talk to them about what they were doing with their lives. Conrad Coleman noted a particularly memorable occasion when a young man told Dr. Coleman that he wanted to drop out of school. "She almost came across the desk, lecturing the boy adamantly about getting an education," he stated. Dr. Coleman believed that no one should take his or her education and opportunities for granted, since she had learned the hard way that one must sometimes struggle to obtain them. She also expanded her reach to the youth by tackling the Hispanic drop out problem in Midland. Soon, Coleman found herself waging another legal battle. This time, her adversary was the Midland Independent School District. She played an instrumental role in school desegregation in 1968, when she helped to enable students from the all-black George Washington Carver High School to attend the other high schools in the town (Fuller). Furthermore, in the case *Coleman v. Midland Independent School District*, Coleman alleged that the Midland Independent School District was maintaining separate schools for black and Mexican-American students at the elementary school level (Fuller). She was found to be correct, and the problem was remedied by the introduction of the "cluster system" into Midland schools. In the cluster system, schoolchildren were bused to different schools in attempts to integrate and diversify. This eliminated the problem of schools that were unintentionally segregated because of inequality in housing and racial segregation in neighborhoods.

In her old age, Coleman continued to strive towards equality in all facets of life in Midland. Unfortunately, though, she passed away on October 11, 2005. Despite her death, it's clear that her actions in the past have left a resounding mark on the present day.

Her first lasting legacy is the Viola M. Coleman Clinic. On August 15, 2008, the 801 E. Florida Street clinic where she used to practice held its grand re-opening. The Midland Community Healthcare Services renovated the clinic, and it now serves 12,000 patients a year. The center offers affordable dental and family care- something that Coleman had always made a priority. The Director of Development for the project, Judy Overbeck, stated, "She forever changed this community for the better and was always fighting for equity wherever it was needed. I do really think she is smiling down on us today"(Campbell).

A second legacy of Coleman's is less tangible. The lasting connection she had with her patients forever changed their lives. As Mrs. Fuller, a patient and friend of Coleman stated, "Dr. Coleman was just like family to all of us." She wasn't merely a doctor; she was a friend. As an advocate for the underprivileged, Coleman was considered to be someone who truly cared about people. Mrs. Fuller blithely remarked of Coleman's love for the children of Midland, saying, "Dr. Coleman delivered thousands of babies! She cared about each and every one of them and would hang their pictures up on the wall of her office." A truly vibrant, benevolent soul, Coleman made lasting differences in the lives of her patients.

One final legacy that Coleman has left upon Midland, Texas, is the creation of Coleman High School. School board member James Fuller pushed to have the school named after her because he felt her unwavering commitment to education needed to be commemorated. The school was established for at-risk students who had lost motivation at their typical high school, and who might not otherwise graduate. Pregnant teens are also encouraged to attend the school

(Schneider). This exemplified Coleman's belief that everyone ought to receive a proper education, no matter what difficulties they face in their day-to-day lives. Mr. Fuller remarked, "Viola Coleman served as a sort of 'live model' for these kids who were struggling to stay on the right path. She epitomized the fact that you could do what you want, and become what you want, as long as you were willing to make the effort and pay the price."

Viola M. Coleman arrived in Midland upon a stroke of luck- her train happened to stop here, and Midland Memorial Hospital happened to have an opening for her. But the legacy that she has left upon Midland is greater than mere happenstance. She managed to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles on the trail towards civil rights, and she did so by means of her unrelenting diligence and audacity. As the city's first black woman physician, and as a community activist, her actions in the past have forever altered the way Midland is today.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Byrd, Daniel E. Letter to Viola Johnson. 31 May 1946.

From the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, this letter highlighted the assistance that Miss Johnson received in taking action against LSU. The refusal of her admittance was clearly a tremendous cause of concern for the N.A.A.C.P., and this helped me to realize the process that Miss Johnson had to go through to take the issue to court.

Byrd, Daniel E. Letter to Viola Johnson. 31 August 1946.

In this document, Mr. Byrd discusses the manner in which Viola must file her suit, and explains that her case has been relayed to Thurgood Marshall. Byrd reveals what he thinks about Viola's character, wistfully wishing that more African Americans were like her.

Byrd, Daniel E. Letter to Viola Johnson. 3 February 1948.

This letter of encouragement from the NAACP to Viola gave insight to a very surprising aspect of the time. Byrd relates how many African Americans were content to be subjected to their inferior status, which is quite surprising. He explains that the open-minded youth are the key to achieving equality.

Chandler, Cory. "A View from the South Side." Midland Reporter Telegram. 10 August 2003.

Always pushing for a unitary status in the Midland Independent School District, Coleman made the point in this article that a South Side elementary school would create a very racially-identified environment. This shows how Coleman always pressed for equal education for students of every race.

Coleman, Conrad. Personal Interview. 21 November 2008.

In this interview I conducted with Viola Coleman's son, I gained insight through his perspective on his mother's life. He offered witty anecdotes and stories of his mother in her everyday life, which gave me an idea of her personality.

Coleman v. Midland Independent School District, 519 F.2d 60 (5th Cir. 1975).

Viola Coleman alleged that the Midland Independent School District was maintaining separate schools for black and Mexican-American students at the elementary school level. It was found that she was, indeed, correct, and the situation was rectified. This exhibits Coleman's unrelenting efforts to gain equality for minorities.

"Entrance to LSU Asked by Negro: Woman Sues for Admission to Medical School." The Associated Press. 23 September 1946.

This newspaper article reveals the common sentiment against African Americans at the time. People truly were of the belief that "separate but equal" was acceptable, and saw no reason why Viola should be allowed into LSU.

Ferguson, Ira Lunan. Fantastic Experiences of a Half-blind and His Interracial Marriage: An Autobiography. New York: T. Gaus' Sons, 1969.

This autobiography chronicled the African American Psychologist's visit to meet Viola Coleman. By opening her home to Ferguson at a moment's notice, Coleman showed her kindness and eagerness to help others.

Fuller, James. Personal Interview. 20 November 2008.

In my interview with school board member Mr. Fuller, I gained an unique insight through the eyes of a friend of Coleman. He offered depth on how Coleman affected education.

Fuller, Robyn. Personal Interview. 20 November 2008.

A friend and patient of Coleman, Mrs. Fuller expressed the kindness that radiated from Coleman. She also gave insight into the strength Coleman mustered from her religion.

Helm, James L. "Iberia Negress Loses Court Suit to Attend LSU." The Associated Press. 1 April 1947.

This article represented another disappointment in Viola's struggle against LSU. The judge in Baton Rouge ruled in favor of LSU and sustained the denial of Viola into the school. The fact that Viola was able to overcome these roadblocks shows how courageous she was.

Johnson, Viola M. Letter to Daniel E. Byrd. 23 June 1946.

This letter was rather intriguing, because it conveys Viola's own perspective on the discrimination against her. It also reveals her commitment to perfection as she apologizes profusely to Mr. Byrd for using dirty paper to type the letter.

Longe, George. Letter to Miss Viola Johnson. 6 December 1947.

Despite the roadblocks Viola faced from whites, it was clear that the African American community supported her. In this letter, the Louisiana Colored Teachers Association sent Viola \$700 to assist her in paying tuition for medical school. I realized that Viola was a symbol of strength to the people of the time.

Ott, Gary. "City Stronger Because of Dr. Coleman." Midland Reporter Telegram. 14 October 2005.

In a general commendation of Coleman's life, this article honored her efforts in every aspect of life. It made clear the effects that she has left on Midland, Texas, long after her death.

Sissom, Shanna. "Judge sentences former Coleman clinic employees." Midland Reporter Telegram. 9 April 2003.

In this news report, the two women who had embezzled over \$300,000 from Coleman were sentenced to jail time. I was amazed by how forgiving Dr. Coleman was to those who had wronged her.

Sorrell, E.W. Letter to Viola Johnson. 2 January 1946.

This letter was sent to Coleman from the Chairman of the Committee on Graduate Study at Meharry Medical College. E.W. Sorrell wished to cooperate with her in her efforts to get into LSU. This source aided me greatly, because it opened my eyes to the struggles Miss Johnson faced because of her race.

United States of America v. Midland Independent School District, 443 F.2d 1180 (5th Cir. 1971).

In this case, it was found that the Midland Independent School District was operating in an acceptable manner and was not segregating students. It was this case that prompted Coleman to take matters into her own hands, as she knew that segregation was in effect.

United States of America & Dr. Viola Coleman v. Midland Independent School District, C.A. NO. MO 70 CA 67 (5th Cir. 1999)

In this case, Coleman fought for desegregation for MISD staff, as well as for a Gifted Education program. This exhibited how passionate Coleman was about ensuring a proper education for all children.

Secondary Sources

Campbell, Ruth. "Florida Street clinic dedication honors Dr. Viola Coleman." Midland Reporter Telegram. 15 August 2008.

Describing the reopening of the remodeled clinic that Coleman once practiced in, this article relates how Coleman's legacy continues years after her death. This showed me that her actions while alive now have created lasting legacies.

Gerhart, Ann. The Perfect Wife: The Life and Choices of Laura Bush. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005.

In this biography about Laura Bush, Gerhart discusses Bush's acquaintance, Viola Coleman. The author humorously portrays the witty Coleman, while explaining how much segregation perturbed her. This gave me a glimpse into Coleman's personality.

King Jr., Martin Luther. Keynote Speech.

The quote used by Martin Luther King Jr. in one of his various speeches serves to summarize the way Coleman lived her life. She was never silent about things that mattered to her, and thus lived her life to the fullest extent.

Sartain, Lee. Invisible Activists: Women of the Louisiana NAACP and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1915-1945. LSU Press, 2007.

This book focused on the ways African American women were treated in their struggle for rights. It helped to clarify aspects of Coleman's struggle against LSU, and portrayed the situation in a different light.

Schneider, Lee Ann. Letter. Midland Reporter Telegram, 7 December 2007.

This letter to the editor is from a woman who is grateful for the Viola M. Coleman High School, and the work it has done for at-risk students. This exemplified how even in death, Coleman continues to touch the lives of those who face hurdles in life.