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Ethel L. Payne

The First Lady of the Black Press

When I was in high school, my daddy purchased a car for me to drive to school. The car provided me with the luxury of not having to ride the school bus and allowed me to have my own transportation from all my after school activities. It was a Mazda MX-6. Black. I took great pride in keeping the exterior, as well as the interior, clean.

However, not many days after I would wash the car, would it be dirty again. I shared my frustration with my father. I vividly remember him telling me, “black catches everything but a ride.” While he was referring to the paint on the car, he was also informing me about the plight of black folks. At sixteen-years-old, I had a vague understanding of his words. Now that I’m thirty-seven, it is crystal clear to me what he meant.

All too often we’ve heard the phrase *the struggle is real*. Laws are established and enforced to keep us as African Americans at a disadvantage. Lines are drawn on maps to limit our access to adequate resources. More lines are drawn to keep us out of positions of power and to silence our voices. Our successes aren’t measured or valued by the same standards as others. The list goes on.

So, as African Americans, it is our custom to break down barriers and excel in spite of the odds against us. Because as my father told me twenty years ago, the odds are not in our favor.

For Women’s History Month, I’d like to celebrate Ethel Payne, a journalist who fought

March

Women’s History Month

8 - International Women’s Day
 11 - Daylight Saving Time begins
 14 - Pi Day
 17 - St. Patrick’s Day
 20 - Spring begins
 25 - Palm Sunday
 30 - Good Friday/ Passover begins



520 Smith Church Rd.
 Roanoke Rapids, NC 27870
 Phone: 252-535-1228
 Fax: 252-535-1344



325 Nash St.
 Rocky Mount, NC 27804
 Phone: 252-446-9696
 Fax: 252-446-9697

against racial and gender discrimination to become the “First Lady of the Black Press”.

Born in 1911 in Chicago, Ethel was the daughter of a Pullman porter and a housewife. According to Notable American Women, “her father died when she was twelve, a trauma that engendered in her a sense of responsibility to her family and others, and a determination to protect the weak”. It was this determination that led to her success as a journalist and human and civil rights activist.

Payne’s love for writing began with her love of reading. She spent much time in the Chicago Public Library. She attended the Chicago Public Library Training School and became a junior library assistant. Later, Payne qualified for a government-documents librarian post at the U.S. Department of Justice. Unfortunately, she was denied the position because of her race.

In 1948, Payne entered the Army Special Services and became a hostess at the quartermaster depot in Tokyo, Japan, where she planned recreation for black troops on the base. During her time there, she kept a diary which documented what she witnessed on the base. Alex Wilson, an African American journalist with the Chicago Defender, used her diary notes to publish how black GIs and Japanese women were being mistreated in the Far East. As a result, Payne lost her job in the military and transitioned into her journalism career.

In addition to writing for one of the most influential African American newspapers—the Chicago Defender—Payne broke many barriers during her tenure. She became a Washington correspondent. She was the second African American woman to be accredited to the White House press corps. At White House press conferences, she addressed issues affecting African Americans. She saw herself as a “conduit through which black citizens, whose interests were largely ignored, could have access to presidential thinking about their concerns”. She was a much needed voice for African Americans during this time of segregation and discrimination.

Her notoriety also includes being the first African American female war correspondent. She reported on the treatment of segregated US troops in Korea, the Vietnam War, and the Nigerian civil war. Too, Payne was the first African American reporter invited to China. In 1972, she became the first black female commentator on network television. She worked for CBS and Spectrum.

Payne used her words, both written and spoken, to bring awareness to injustices and to hold others accountable for their wrongdoings. She used her talent as a writer to advocate for her fellow African American sisters and brothers. Sadly, the odds continue to be against us. We must follow Ethel Payne’s example to use whatever gift(s) we have to fight for the rights we all deserve.

Educating our families to help shape their financial future!

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Now, with our professional experience along with a team of legal professionals, we will again elevate the industry standard, by specializing in insurance for you, your spouse, your children and other relatives. Our goal is to help you get insured, and remain insured.

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