



THE WOMXN FROM HISTORY WHO INSPIRES ME MOST

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In this article women is spelled womxn. Womxn is used, especially in intersectional feminism, as an alternative spelling to avoid the suggestion of sexism perceived in the sequences m-a-n and m-e-n, and to be inclusive of trans and nonbinary women.

In schools across the country, students have recognized the lack of diversity present in the standard curriculum-- from gender to race, ability status, and sexual orientation, historically the stories told in classrooms have been monolithic. While during Womxn's History Month we were reminded of the diversity of narratives present in our shared past, we have a responsibility to educate ourselves on the stories of womxn of vastly intersectional identities who have worked tirelessly to leave a lasting impact on our society. Few people recognize the importance of this self-education more than Septima Poinsette Clark.

Ms. Clark was an educator, community activist, and changemaker during the Civil Rights Movement. She began her career with the intention of being a teacher but was soon faced with the reality that people of color were barred from teaching in public schools in her city of Charleston. After facing this injustice, she successfully partnered with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to eliminate discriminatory laws against black educators. Unfortunately, her success was met by another barrier. In 1956, the state of South Carolina passed a law that banned any state employees, including public school educators, from participating in civil rights organizations. After the law was passed, Ms. Clark held true to her beliefs and refused to resign her alliance with the NAACP, losing her job as a result. Despite this setback, she would not be stopped. She went on to partner with another leading civil rights organization to kickstart a grassroots education movement, entitled the Citizenship Education Program, in which she brought civics and political education to those who had been denied access. Her work was predicated on the knowledge that expanding access to civic literacy would help people take one step forward on the journey to establishing equal political rights for all. The gravity of her impact has led her to be dubbed the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement." Unfortunately, despite her substantial impact, she has not received the same level of household notoriety as other giants of the Civil Rights Movement.

Ms. Clark has greatly inspired my interest in education advocacy. Her passion for having a diversity of teachers in the public school classroom and ensuring that all people have access to the same quality of education has led to my understanding that education is the ultimate seed of change. If we want



to combat systems of suppression in society, both on an institutional and interpersonal scale, we must begin by bringing new voices to light. If we are only presented with a single story, then that is all we will understand. The intricacies and complexities that lie within each person's identity will be overlooked if we do not take the time to listen to their stories. When we are not exposed to a breadth of experiences, many aspects of our education will only serve to affirm our internal biases, rather than challenge them. As Ms. Clark once stated, "I believe unconditionally in the ability of people to respond when they are told the truth. We need to be taught to study rather than believe, to inquire rather than to affirm."

On a personal level, I have used this philosophy of education to enact change in my community on a smaller scale. From LGBTQ+ advocacy to promoting literacy, the role of education in shaping our perception of the world and of ourselves, as preached by Ms. Clark, which has guided me in recognizing that before we can enact long-term change, we must first be informed. For my HERlead project, Talking TS, I employed the concept of using stories to reduce biases by creating a platform in which young people with Tourette's can share their experiences, and highlight the success of other young people despite the challenges they face.

I was inspired to start this project to help young people with Tourette Syndrome see positive representation and help them understand that their disorder will not hold them back from doing extraordinary things. My experience at the HERlead Fellowship helped to give me both the confidence and the resources to pursue this avenue of change-making. Additionally, it provided me with a community of inspiring female leaders of all ages and pursuits, working to make a positive impact. The sisterhood that I have gained through the HERlead Fellowship is unmatched. It is filled with empowerment, unwavering support, and the desire to lift each other up. With impactful womxn, such as Ms. Clark, ahead of me, and the inspiring sisters I found through the HERlead Fellowship by my side, I know that no obstacle can hold me back from creating the change that I want to see.