

BLACKS AND WHITES TOGETHER: Interracial Leadership in the Phoenix Civil Rights Movement

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BLACKS AND WHITES TOGETHER

Interracial Leadership in the Phoenix Civil Rights Movement

by
Mary Melcher

RACE RELATIONS IN PHOENIX changed dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s. In these years, determined black and white activists worked together in organizations such as the Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Urban League to break down educational barriers and end social discrimination.¹ Because of the efforts of these educated, middle-class men and women, Arizona schools were desegregated in 1953, one year before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against public school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The eyes of the nation turned toward Phoenix and Arizona, where people observed firsthand the effects of desegregation. Today, the veterans of the civil rights movement in Phoenix look back with pride on their accomplishments of the past four decades.

Phoenix's founders promoted the city as "a middle class utopia, a demiparadise in the desert." The only southwestern metropolis founded and run exclusively by Anglos, Arizona's capital city was not known for its racial tolerance. Most of its residents (except for American Indians) had come to the sunbelt from other parts of the country, including the East and West coasts and the Great Lakes. Many with agricultural backgrounds migrated to Phoenix from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas. These newcomers arrived in Arizona with their prej-

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udices intact and tried to recast the Anglo-dominated society of their original homes. The 1920 city directory proudly advertised Phoenix as “a modern town of 40,000 people, and the best kind of people too. A very small percentage of Mexicans, negroes or foreigners.”²

People of color were excluded from social and economic life in this “demiparadise.” Compared to other minorities, Afro-Americans experienced the greatest amount of overt racial discrimination and segregation. Laws limited their employment opportunities, forced them into segregated neighborhoods, denied them access to schools and public accommodations, and restricted their access to medical care.³

Educational and social segregation of blacks in Arizona dated back to territorial days. A 1909 law segregated pupils of African descent from Caucasians, except in high schools. Whenever twenty-five or more blacks matriculated to a high school, 15 percent of district residents could call an election to decide whether or not to place black and white students into separate but equal facilities. In fact, facilities were never equal once segregation was decreed.

Blacks experienced discrimination in other ways as well. The 1912 state constitution declared interracial marriages illegal. Reflecting racial bigotry, chapters of the Ku Klux Klan sprang up in Phoenix, Glendale, and Flagstaff in 1916 and 1917. In certain areas of Phoenix, Anglo homeowners banded together and signed restrictive covenants limiting the sale of land to whites only.⁴

Rather than meekly accept discrimination, African-Americans found strength in organization. In 1919 black merchants Samuel Bayless and C. Credille formed the Phoenix Advancement League to combat racial injustice. During the Depression, the Colored Businessman’s Association aided blacks whom the Community Welfare Council ignored, while the Phoenix Protection League fought employment discrimination. The Phoenix chapter of the Arizona Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs also worked to improve conditions for blacks. Likewise, black churches sought to strengthen racial pride and community togetherness. Because as a rule Phoenix banned black organizations from using city auditoriums, the churches served

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as community halls.⁵

Despite discrimination, a small black middle class emerged during the early twentieth century. Black-owned hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, bars, pool halls, and even a beauty shop provided services to members of the black community. In 1921 Dr. Winston C. Hackett opened the Booker T. Washington Memorial Hospital on Jefferson Street to provide medical care to blacks.⁶

While a few black businesspersons prospered, prior to World War II most blacks (and many Mexican families) lived in poverty in the ghettos of southwest Phoenix. An influx of veterans and migrant cotton pickers after the war exacerbated the already horrible living arrangements. City-county health director Dr. H. L. McMartin decried the delapidated hovels that served as homes in South Phoenix, along with the open backyard toilets and the crowded wooden shacks that lined the littered streets and dirty alleys. In far too many cases, squatters simply pitched tents and lived without electricity, water, or trash collection.⁷

Blacks who escaped these impoverished conditions still had to contend with segregation in theaters, parks, and swimming pools. At its annual midsummer picnic for children, *The Arizona Republic* diligently separated invitees according to race—blacks, Mexicans, and Anglos. Blacks could neither rent rooms in the city's motels and hotels nor eat in most of its restaurants.

Similar conditions existed in the city's schools. Grade schools were strictly segregated. A "Colored High School" was established in 1914 and renamed George Washington Carver High in 1943. When W. A. Robinson became Carver's principal in 1945, he campaigned aggressively to improve the school. Robinson recruited black teachers with master's degrees from around the country and demanded that district administrators improve facilities at the black high school. Refusing to accept cast-off stock from white schools, he improved the equipment and supplies at Carver and added music and art classes to the curriculum. For the first time, art teacher Eugene Grigsby obtained tools for making pots and jewelry and equipment for developing photographs.⁸

Despite these and other improvements at Carver High

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School, some Phoenicians still saw educational segregation as a blight on the city. In the late 1940s, white and black activists organized to combat institutionalized racism. Motivated by a deep aversion to segregation, whites strove to understand racial oppression and identify with the blacks who suffered under it. Many of Phoenix's black activists had long personal histories of involvement with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); several came from middle-class families with a strong heritage of activism. Ted Ragsdale, the uncle of prominent Phoenix black mortician Lincoln Ragsdale, had been lynched because of his work as president of the Oklahoma NAACP. Although meant to inspire fear, the lynching had the opposite effect. As Lincoln Ragsdale explained:

It didn't put fear, it put aggressiveness in us that we're going to have to work it through the system. You can't work it with a gun because you can't outshoot white folks. There are more white folks than black folks. So you have to work it intellectually, hard work, saving your money. . . . You have to outsmart him.⁹

White men like attorney William Mahoney and physician Fred Holmes could not duplicate the tragic, bitter memories of someone like Ragsdale, yet they were equally determined to challenge segregation in Phoenix. In 1947 Holmes invited Professor Lewis Wirth, a scholar from the University of Chicago, to speak about race relations. About 300 Phoenicians, blacks and whites, attended the event. After the talk, they organized the Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity (GPCCU). In the early years, the group devoted most of its attention to the desegregation of Phoenix public schools. Once they had secured this goal, the GPCCU became an important umbrella organization working for racial justice.¹⁰

William Mahoney recalled the organization's argument to press for desegregation:

The die is pretty well cast in the South or in an old city like New York or Chicago, but . . . we, here, are present for creation. We're making a society where the die isn't cast. It can be for good or ill.



"No Concessions." Lincoln Ragsdale and Governor Paul Fannin square off over the public accommodations law in 1964.



Eugene and Thomasena Grigsby.

Mahoney and his fellow activists also stressed that “you don’t want to educate bigots.”¹¹

Organizing the GPCCU was not without tension, according to Ruth Finn, a white activist and wife of attorney Herb Finn. Fearful that they would be labeled communists, Fred Holmes proposed that all members sign an oath swearing that they were not “reds.” Many of the organizers resented the idea, but went along with it anyway.¹²

Eugene and Thomasena Grigsby were among the blacks who joined the GPCCU. The couple had moved to Phoenix in 1946, when Eugene accepted a teaching position at Carver High School. Through the GPCCU and the Urban League, the Grigsbys met other middle-class blacks, as well as whites, who were interested in changing the racial atmosphere in Phoenix. Segregation-minded Phoenicians saw them as troublemakers as they broke the barriers separating the races in a very segregated city. Attorney Mahoney’s activities in organizations such as the GPCCU, the Urban League, and the NAACP probably cost him the business of conservative clients. According to Thomasena Grigsby, Phoenix activists may not have been in the

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majority, but they had the brainpower. “We were like yeast in bread,” she explained. When they came together, things started to happen.¹³

The GPCCU joined with the Arizona Council for Civic Unity, a statewide organization, to press for school desegregation. In their first effort, they spent thousands of dollars to hire California civil rights lawyers Al Wiren and Lauren Miller to press their cause. Aware that several desegregation cases were moving toward the U.S. Supreme Court, Wiren and Miller filed suit in federal court to desegregate Arizona schools. U.S. District Court judge David Ling dismissed the case, however, instructing the attorneys to exhaust first their remedies in the state courts before appearing in front of the federal bench.¹⁴

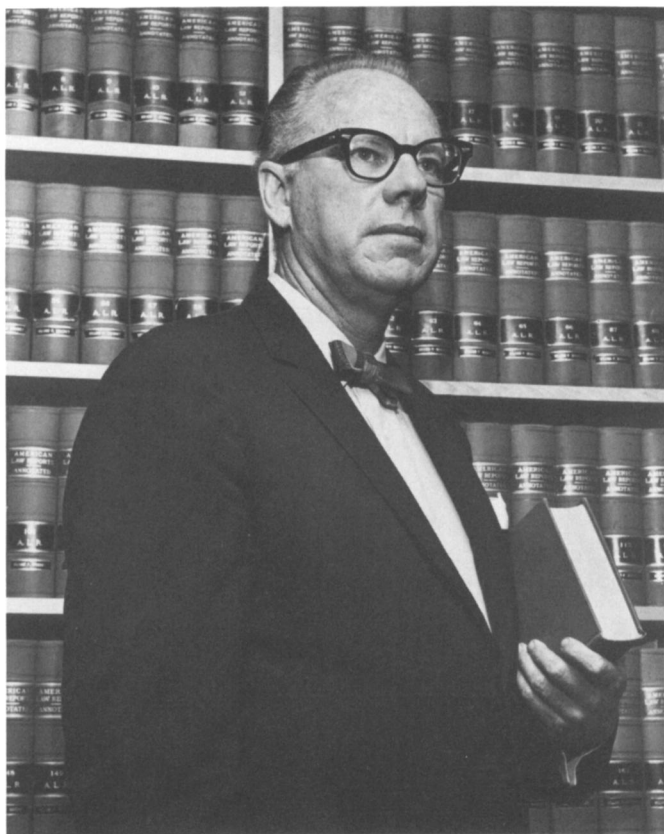
Undaunted, the GPCCU lobbied the legislature and, in 1951, secured a statute giving local school boards the option to desegregate voluntarily. Unfortunately, the law lacked teeth. As independent legal entities, the Phoenix school districts chose not to desegregate. An attempt to achieve desegregation through a ballot initiative failed by a 2-to-1 margin. Finally, on February 9, 1953, H. B. Daniels, a black attorney, and Herb Finn, a white, argued a case in the Maricopa County Court against high school segregation. The GPCCU having exhausted its legal funds, Daniels paid the \$5 filing fee from his own pocket. In a landmark decision, Superior Court judge Fred C. Struckmeyer handed down the first legal opinion in the United States declaring school segregation unconstitutional. “A half century of intolerance is enough,” Struckmeyer declared.¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, Maricopa County Court judge Charles Bernstein also ruled in Daniels’s and Finn’s favor, striking down segregation in Arizona grade schools. According to William Mahoney, Arizona became “a footnote in *Brown vs. Board of Education*,” when a clerk from the U.S. Supreme Court requested a copy of Bernstein’s opinion in the Phoenix case.¹⁶

While Mahoney and others were “darn proud” of their victory, some blacks experienced mixed feelings. Teachers at all-black Carver High School had provided excellent educations for black children and enjoyed harmonious relationships with parents. Carver also fielded an excellent football team that compiled a twenty-one-game winning streak between 1951 and

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1953. As integration proceeded, coaches in the Phoenix Union High School District recruited Carver's top-rated athletes. Black teachers, meanwhile, were reassigned to other schools in the district. Even parents who rejoiced at desegregation hated to see Carver close its doors.¹⁷

Although Phoenix set an example for the nation when it integrated its public schools, living conditions for Afro-Americans remained abysmal. Housing and public facilities were still segregated, and job discrimination was rampant. Hoping that Phoenixians would try to improve their image "once the limelight fell on them," civil rights activists turned for help to Thomasena Grigsby. In addition to her work with the GPCCU, the Urban League, and the NAACP, Grigsby also wrote articles for national black newspapers. Approached in 1952 by Lincoln Ragsdale about Phoenix's all-white veterans' cemetery, Grigsby wrote an article for the Chicago *Defender*, a black newspaper. In it, she explained how Ragsdale's mortuary was holding the body of Thomas Reed, a black serviceman killed in Korea whose family wanted him buried with his



William P. Mahoney, Jr.

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fellow veterans in Greenwood Cemetery. As Grigsby later explained:

To talk about that in Phoenix alone wasn't going to do it. The white newspapers weren't concerned about it particularly. The only thing you could do was to get this out of the community. Remember Phoenix has always been a tourist town. People who come to a tourist town want to feel it's peaceful, restful, etc. If they get the idea that this is going on in Phoenix, they might begin to question this [discrimination].

Reed was eventually buried in the previously all-white veterans' cemetery. By publicizing events in Phoenix, Thomasena Grigsby helped break the pattern of segregation.¹⁸

While Grigsby was employing her journalistic skills to improve racial conditions, Lincoln Ragsdale waged a private battle to live in a white neighborhood. Real estate agents and banks restricted the residential mobility of blacks by refusing to show them houses in white neighborhoods and by denying them loans. Ragsdale bypassed the restrictions by having a white friend purchase a house at 1606 West Thomas Road, far north of the black enclaves in South Phoenix and around Washington and Van Buren streets in downtown Phoenix. The friend then transferred the title to Ragsdale while the deal was still in escrow. Even so, Ragsdale had bought the house almost sight unseen. The realtors, he explained, "wouldn't let me in."

Although Ragsdale, his wife, Eleanor, and their four children lived in their home on Thomas Road for seventeen years, the neighborhood never accepted them. Vandals spray-painted the word "nigger" on their house, and white playmates mistreated the Ragsdale children. Every new police officer who patrolled the area invariably stopped Ragsdale as he returned late at night. "I looked suspicious," the thriving mortician explained. "And all you have to do to look suspicious is to be driving a Cadillac and be black. . . . When I'd see him coming with his lights, I'd get my ownership of the car out and show him my driver's license." In the face of injustice, the Ragsdale family kept their house neat and in good repair and "dug in their heels." They realized that their presence in a white neighborhood was a source of pride to many blacks who might lose

faith in their own ability to challenge segregation if the Ragsdales moved out.

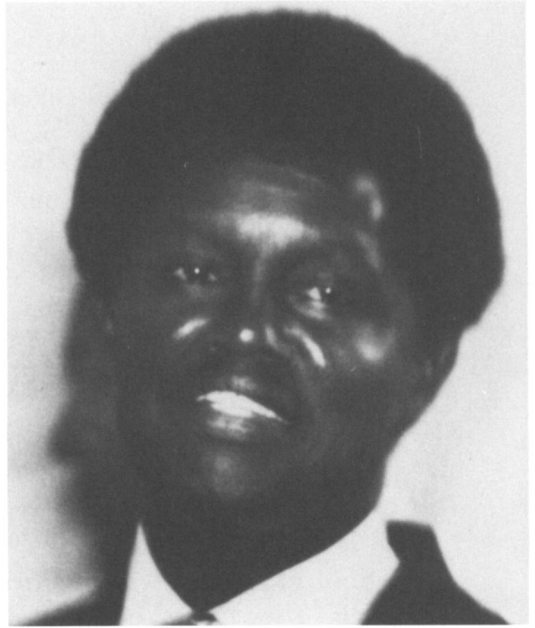
Lincoln Ragsdale also suffered harassment from the business community, probably because of his outspoken activities as vice-president of the local NAACP. The bank repossessed his car after he missed one payment. When he missed a monthly payment on a business loan, the bank threatened to accelerate collection of the \$90,000 debt. This would have ruined him in 1964. Fortunately, the bank official with whom Ragsdale was dealing left town, and Ragsdale was able to make two payments through a secretary. His loan remained in force.¹⁹

Ragsdale and others devoted much of their time to the NAACP. Two branches of the organization had been founded in the Phoenix area during the 1940s—a Maricopa County group headed by H. B. Daniels and a South Phoenix branch under the leadership of Dr. Robert Phillips and his wife, Louise. Their victories, however, were few, and their work mostly consisted of lodging official complaints against discrimination and police brutality.²⁰ Things changed after the arrival of the Reverend George Brooks in 1953. Young and well-educated, the twenty-seven-year-old clergyman, with the help of Presbyterian elders, organized the Southminster Presbyterian Church in South Phoenix. In 1960 he convinced the two Phoenix-area branches of the NAACP to merge, and within six months Brooks became president of the revitalized Maricopa County NAACP.²¹

As president, Brooks aggressively fought discrimination in employment. At a 1962 U.S. Civil Rights Commission hearing in Phoenix, representatives of the NAACP and the Urban League decried black unemployment and underemployment in both the private and the public sector. In an effort “to move into every aspect of economic life in this community,” Brooks and Ragsdale approached employers and urged them to hire blacks. Brooks recalled their meeting with Valley National Bank president Jim Patrick:

Lincoln [Ragsdale] was brash, nasty . . . he would back him up into a corner and I was the good guy. I would pull him out. Then he [Patrick] would get belligerent again, and Lincoln would back him up

The Reverend George Brooks.



again, and I would pull him out . . . that's what you call creative conflict. We didn't know it, but that's what we did.

Regardless, the tactic worked. Patrick agreed to integrate the Valley National work force and hired Wilbur Hankins as the bank's first black teller.²²

Brooks visited other employers, including IBM, Goldwater's, Food City, and Woolworth's. When Woolworth's refused to integrate, black and white clergy and NAACP picketers walked the street in front of the store carrying signs that read: "Stop Discrimination" and "Woolworth's Discriminates Against Black People." According to Brooks, the white ministers, priests, and rabbis were among the NAACP's most reliable supporters; they answered to a higher employer and were available to picket during the day. Eventually, Woolworth's national office ordered its Phoenix store to hire blacks.²³

Rabbi Albert Plotkin was among the religious leaders who carried a picket sign. As part of the North Phoenix Corporation Ministry, he and other liberal white clergymen made it a point to know black ministers. Many of them joined the NAACP and the Urban League. When George Brooks called on them to picket, they responded with enthusiasm. "He had a

rather commanding ‘I need you,’” Rabbi Plotkin recalled. “George was the catalyst. He had the personality.”²⁴

Like other black ministers throughout the country, Brooks was financially independent of the white community. In Phoenix, as elsewhere, the black churches provided financial as well as moral support for the civil rights movement. They also served as meeting places. The Maricopa County NAACP gathered either at the First Institutional Baptist Church or at the Tanner Chapel, both of which were larger than Brooks’s own church.²⁵

Sometimes, NAACP leaders were able to head off discrimination before it occurred. During the spring of 1962, local rumors reached the Maricopa County chapter that a large company was using the Arizona Welfare Department to hire high school graduates with no previous work experience; the one catch—they had to be white. It appeared that the state employment service was collaborating with private industry to discriminate against blacks. When George Brooks and Herb Eli of the Urban League visited the employment office, they learned that the Motorola Corporation was indeed trying to hire only white workers.²⁶

Brooks immediately requested a meeting with Arizona Attorney General Robert Pickrell. “I was *good* that day,” Brooks later boasted. “I accused the welfare department and the state employment services of being in collusion with private industry to keep black folks unemployed.” When the Phoenix newspapers picked up the story, Motorola quickly integrated its work force.²⁷

In addition to ending employment discrimination, the NAACP also fought to dismantle segregation of public facilities. Barbara Callahan of the Phoenix chapter’s Youth Department organized several sit-ins on one summer day in 1960. Energized by events occurring throughout the country, young black Phoenicians sat in at lunch counters downtown. In each instance, they were served. The absence of resistance from white owners and managers suggested to Callahan and Brooks that many Phoenicians were ready to change, and only needed the impetus. Also, blacks were a small minority in Phoenix and, therefore, did not pose a threat to the overwhelming white majority.²⁸

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Phoenix also mirrored the nation at large in the sense that the NAACP pursued a more confrontational approach than did the Urban League. According to Eugene Grigsby, although the Urban League and the NAACP both worked to halt discrimination, the NAACP was the “pusher, the firebrand.” George Brooks agreed, adding that “we were the War Department, and they were the State Department.” The NAACP did the “dirty work,” and the Urban League cleaned up the mess.²⁹

While the Urban League and the NAACP struggled to integrate Phoenix businesses and public facilities, the GPCCU called for a city commission to oversee race relations and stop discrimination. After nearly two years of lobbying, the Phoenix City Council established the Human Relations Commission on July 2, 1963. During its first eight months, the commission investigated numerous complaints from black Phoenicians who had been barred from restaurants, hotels, and places of recreation.

Initially, the commission attempted to persuade businesses to integrate. When it became obvious that persuasion was not working, it recommended passage of an ordinance that would make segregation of public facilities illegal. The city council responded on June 16, 1964 with a Public Accommodations Law. Henceforth, it was unlawful “to discriminate in places of public accommodation against any person because of race, creed, national origin, or ancestry.” The Human Relations Commission set up a Public Accommodations Committee to oversee enforcement of the ordinance.³⁰

Dr. Martin Luther King’s appearances before Phoenix and Tempe audiences in 1964 galvanized activists in the Salt River Valley. Brooks, who had worked with King in Atlanta, invited the civil rights leader to Arizona, and Rabbi Plotkin solicited funds from Jewish businessmen to defray the cost of the visit. In moving speeches on June 3 to 450 Kiwanis members and before a crowd of 3,000 at Goodwin Auditorium on the Arizona State University campus, King called for nonviolent action “to get rid of the last vestiges of segregation.” “You may throw us in jail . . . bomb our homes . . . threaten our little children,” King resolved, “and—difficult as it is—we will still love you. . . . This is the meaning of nonviolent action.”³¹

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While King's followers in Phoenix fought segregation, they also worked to improve the cultural life of black youth. As chairman of the Urban League's Education and Youth Committee, Eugene Grigsby organized exhibits and sponsored murals at the juvenile detention home and at public housing projects. The Urban League also held workshops to interest children in art activities and build up a sense of community. Grigsby, former high school principal Morrison Warren, and others stressed the importance of providing role models for black youth. Through education, they helped students understand racism and develop positive self-images.

Grigsby stressed the importance of people learning to live together and to appreciate each other's differences, while accepting their own self-worth. He was appalled by Carver High School students who rejected their African heritage. Some girls in his art class drew self-portraits in which they were blond-haired and blue-eyed. Grigsby remembered, in particular, a girl who wore an ugly blond wig. He was pleasantly surprised one day when she came to school without the wig and wearing her hair in a natural. "I beamed because she had accepted herself," he explained. "And until one accepts oneself and one's own heritage, then it's difficult for one to accept somebody else and to exchange and share."³²

A multi-religious group hoped to achieve these same goals through Any Town Interfaith Camp. Organizers like Rabbi Plotkin and Nancy Phillips recognized that because of de facto segregation in housing, white children did not meet blacks in their classrooms or neighborhoods. For one week each summer, black, white, and Mexican-American boys and girls gathered at the Interfaith Camp to discuss prejudice, race, bigotry, religion, nationality, and family, and to get to know one another. The sessions produced community leaders, including future Arizona House minority leader Art Hamilton.³³

Phoenix civil rights leaders also fought to preserve for minorities the fundamental right to vote. The task was not an easy one. Activists recall that in the early 1960s some Young Republicans tried to intimidate blacks, Hispanics, and poor people who were waiting in line to cast their ballots. According to Madge Copeland, committeewoman for her predominantly

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black precinct, Phoenix attorney William Rehnquist mailed letters to voters in her precinct; if they failed to respond, he claimed that they did not live at the addresses where they were registered and tried to have them removed from the voting rolls. Witnesses in South Phoenix reported that Rehnquist asked voters at Reverend Brooks's church, which also served as a polling place, to read from the Constitution. If they were unable to do so, he insisted that they not be allowed to vote. Brooks, who served as election officer, immediately stopped the voting and confronted Rehnquist. "I told him that he was interfering with the people's right of franchise," Brooks stated, "and I was going to call the sheriff and have him arrested." Rehnquist left the polling place.³⁴

While some activists fought to ensure democratic voting rights for all, others were concerned by the exclusion of minorities from city government. Prior to the mid-1960s, the Charter Government Committee (CGC) held a tight grip on Phoenix city elections. Formed in 1949 and supported by the likes of newspaper publisher Eugene Pulliam and businessman Barry Goldwater, the CGC rallied Phoenicians behind its slate and selected successful candidates for Phoenix mayor and city council throughout the 1950s. Critics complained that the CGC represented mainly the white middle and upper classes, and indeed nearly all CGC candidates were conservative Republicans who lived in the affluent areas of north Phoenix.³⁵

In 1963 some members of the GPCCU formed the so-called "Act Committee" to challenge the CGC. Functioning independently of the GPCCU, the Act Committee ran a slate of candidates for city council that included Lincoln Ragsdale, Ed Korrnick, and Manuel Tena, all of whom were active in civil rights. "We didn't win," Jewish activist Fran Waldman boasted, "but did we shake up city hall! Ed Korrnick almost won." The following election year, in 1965, the CGC placed black educator Morrison Warren on its slate, and he won election to the Phoenix city council. Warren was re-elected in 1967, and that same year Ed Korrnick also gained a council seat, running on former mayor Milton Graham's Citizens' Ticket. Warren lost his bid for a third term in 1969, but two years later Calvin Goode, another black, was elected to the council as a CGC candidate. The con-



Fran Waldman.

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trol of Phoenix politics by upper middle-class whites had begun to dissolve.³⁶

By the mid-1960s, segregation was illegal in Phoenix. In 1965, the Arizona legislature followed the lead of the U.S. Congress and passed a civil rights act that forbade discrimination in housing, voting, employment, and public accommodations. But outlawing segregation and discrimination did not automatically bring about social and economic integration for blacks. In 1964 the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) staged a demonstration to protest extreme poverty in South Phoenix. Responding to pressure from CORE and other organizations, then-mayor Graham created Leadership and Education for the Advancement of Phoenix (LEAP), an advisory council that would act as a clearinghouse for federal programs designed to better conditions in the city's poorest neighborhoods.³⁷

In 1966 LEAP became a city department administering federal War on Poverty funds. These government-sponsored programs provided new educational and employment opportunities, but many activists continued to express dismay at the incredibly slow economic progress of blacks and Hispanics. Although the federal government had provided \$15 million to improve conditions in South Phoenix, little had been accomplished. The majority of the city's blacks and many Hispanics still lived in terrible slums within the 21.2-square-mile target area. Thirty percent of South Phoenix residents subsisted on less than \$3,000 a year.³⁸

Persistent racial tension in South Phoenix and alleged police harrassment erupted into violence on July 26, 1967. Rioters, whom George Brooks described as radical noisemakers (many from CORE), burned down a house belonging to a Mrs. Davis. Brooks played the role of "strong man" in an attempt to calm the situation. "We're not going to do anything foolish in this town," he warned, "and if you do it, you're going to have to come by me."³⁹

Brooks debated the issues with the young protestors on a street corner near Osborn Project. Finally, they agreed to meet with Mayor Graham in an effort to obtain more federal monies for fighting poverty and improving education. "We kept mov-

ing," Brooks recalled, "but without the kind of volatility we had in other parts of the country." Even so, the riot resulted in over 200 arrests and the imposition of a curfew. Four days later, Mayor Graham lifted the curfew and began to push for improved training and employment opportunities for minorities.⁴⁰

In Phoenix, as in the nation at large, men generally had exercised leadership in the struggle for equal rights. Unlike in the South, where work in the civil rights movement led many women to re-examine their roles as females, Phoenix women were content to work behind the scenes as volunteers with the GPCCU, the Urban League, and the NAACP. Ruth Finn points out that much of the civil rights activity in Phoenix occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, before many American women challenged traditional assumptions of female roles. Finn and her fellow activist Barbara Callahan speculate that a strong female could have assumed leadership of one of Phoenix's civil rights organizations, but that most women were too busy raising children or saw themselves as helpmates to the men. Phoenix women did not make the connection between racism and sexism as did white women in the national movement.⁴¹

Nevertheless, several dynamic women played vital roles in the Phoenix civil rights struggle. For years, Fran Waldman single-handedly organized GPCUU events and won a reputation as "the important woman behind the organization." Barbara Callahan helped young people stage sit-ins during the 1960s, and Madge Copeland labored tirelessly within the Democratic Party to elect blacks to public office. Like their sisters nationally, Phoenix women picketed, lobbied, marched, and shared information. William Mahoney discovered that women were more effective than men in "leaning" on legislators and that they did not hesitate to make their feelings known. They were not worried about offending people in power and operated from deep feelings about the fundamental issue of civil rights. Support from southern white women living in Phoenix assisted the NAACP in its struggle. George Brooks remembers women with long Southern drawls discussing the issues at meetings. According to Brooks, they would say "we know what we're talking about. We've been

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there. We know what they do to black folks in the South.” Unfortunately, these courageous women, white and black, have received little public recognition for their work.⁴²

By working together, this small band of activists—black and white, male and female—broke down the barriers of racial discrimination and profoundly changed the political and social fabric of Phoenix. At a time when, according to Ruth Finn, “screaming injustices . . . had the moral and legal approval of the courts, the legislature, and the populace,” they helped push forward legislation and court decisions that altered the public perception of morality and rendered bigoted behavior unacceptable. Of course, injustices still exist in Phoenix as they do elsewhere. But, Finn observes, “it’s a different world” now than it was in 1948.⁴³

Today, leaders of the Phoenix civil rights movement recall their efforts with satisfaction and pride. George Brooks believes that his confrontational style alienated many people in the Phoenix power structure. But he has no regrets and is glad that he wasn’t a “good boy.” Barbara Callahan learned through the movement that people could bring about meaningful change. White activists like Rabbi Plotkin and Nancy Phillips achieved a sense of personal satisfaction through their work with blacks and their successes in swaying public opinion. Councilman Calvin Goode, who as a boy had attended an all-black grade school in Gila Bend, followed the advice he had given to others and became a community leader in Phoenix. Like many of his fellow activists of the 1960s, he looks back on significant accomplishments while pointing to the increasing poverty and joblessness that plague the black community. Even as a wealthy businessman living in Paradise Valley, Lincoln Ragsdale is barred from admission to the local country club. “The snake’s head is cut off,” he warns, “but his tail is still wiggling.” The battle for equality is far from over.⁴⁴

NOTES

¹Recent studies emphasize the role of local leadership in the civil rights movement. See, for example, William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (New

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York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

²1920 *Phoenix City and Salt River Valley Directory* (Phoenix: Directory Company, 1921), p. 1.

³Michael Kotlanger, "Phoenix, Arizona: 1920-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 1983), p. 445. Although Mexicans and Mexican-Americans also experienced segregation in schools and public accommodations, their status was not mandated by law.

⁴Richard Harris, *The First Hundred Years: A History of Arizona Blacks* (Apache Junction: Relmo Publishers, 1983), pp. 7, 47, 52, 59. Roger D. Hardaway, "Unlawful Love: A History of Arizona's Miscegenation Law," *Journal of Arizona History*, vol. 27 (Winter, 1986), pp. 377-390; Sue Wilson Abbey, "The Ku Klux Klan in Arizona, 1921-1925," *ibid.*, vol. 14 (Spring, 1973), pp. 10-30.

⁵Harris, *First Hundred Years*, pp. 53, 57; Kotlanger, "Phoenix," p. 458. Occasionally, black organizations were able to rent the Phoenix Union High School auditorium for their events.

⁶Kotlanger, "Phoenix," p. 450. Madge Copeland interview, January 26, 1985. All interviews cited in this article were conducted by the author and are located in the Arizona Historical Foundation, Hayden Library, Arizona State University, Tempe. From 1929 to 1952, Madge Copeland operated the only beauty shop in Phoenix that catered to black women. She was also active in the Democratic Party.

⁷Kotlanger, "Phoenix," p. 459.

⁸Calvin Goode interview, January 24, 1990; Sue Perkins interview, February 20, 1986; Copeland interview; George Brooks interview, January 31, 1990; Albert Plotkin interview, January 29, 1990; William Mahoney interview, February 16, 1990; Thomasena Grigsby interview, February 7, 1990; Eugene Grigsby interview, February 12, 1990; Ruth Finn interview, March 30, 1990. Harris, *First Hundred Years*, pp. 65-72; Bradford Luckingham, *Phoenix: The History of a Southwestern Metropolis* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), p. 173.

⁹Brooks, Thomasena Grigsby, Eugene Grigsby, Mahoney, Finn, and Plotkin interviews. Lincoln Ragsdale interview, April 8, 1990. Both Mahoney and Finn recalled being asked to leave Phoenix restaurants when they attempted to dine with black friends.

¹⁰Mahoney interview. Fran Waldman interview, July 17, 1990. Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity, *To Secure These Rights* (Phoenix: Phoenix Sun Publishing Company, 1961). GPCCU members worked with the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the Urban League, and the NAACP to combat discrimination based upon race and religion.

¹¹Mahoney interview.

¹²Finn interview.

¹³Eugene Grigsby, Thomasena Grigsby, and Mahoney interviews.

¹⁴Mahoney and Finn interviews. Joe Stocker, "Remembering a Challenge to Segregation," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), December 11, 1988, section C, p. 2.

¹⁵W. A. Robinson, "The Progress of Integration in the Phoenix Schools," *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 25 (Fall, 1956), p. 371. Frederick C. Struckmeyer, Maricopa County Superior Court Order and Court Opinion No. 72909, February 9, 1953; Elections, Official Canvasses, 1911-1982, Box 1, both in Arizona Department of Library, Archives and Public Records, Phoenix. Mahoney interview. The school desegregation initiative lost by a vote of 104,226 to 57,970. Tucson public schools voluntarily desegregated in 1951.

¹⁶Hayzel Burton Daniels, "A Black Magistrate's Struggles," in Anne Hodges Morgan and Rennard Strickland, eds., *Arizona Memories* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984), pp. 337-38. Finn and Mahoney interviews.

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¹⁷“Era of Pride and Shame Closed with Carver High,” *Arizona Republic*, February 6, 1990, section D, p. 6. Harris, *First Hundred Years*, p. 72; Robinson, “Progress of Integration,” p. 373. The Phoenix Union High School District did not appeal Judge Bernstein’s ruling. Some blacks later maintained that the district accepted desegregation because Carver High School was too expensive to maintain. Others claimed that PUHSD officials knew that the federal courts would soon outlaw school segregation and therefore decided not to fight Judge Bernstein’s ruling. “Citizens’ Group Gives Help,” *Black Heritage in Arizona* (November, 1976), p. 7.

¹⁸Thomasena Grigsby interview; and her article, “Father Wins Fight to Have Korea Vet Buried in Hometown Cemetery,” *Chicago Defender*, January 19, 1952, p. 1. Grigsby also wrote articles for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Norfolk Journal*, highlighting the activities of exceptional blacks. Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press distributed her columns to black newspapers throughout the country.

¹⁹Ragsdale interview. Ragsdale’s testimony on housing discrimination in Phoenix appeared in *Hearing Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Phoenix, Arizona, February 3, 1962* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), pp. 46-49. Housing discrimination is also discussed in GPCCU, *To Secure These Rights*, pp. 9-13.

²⁰“Black Population Smallest,” *Black Heritage in Arizona* (November, 1976), p. 8. Brooks interview.

²¹Brooks interview. “NAACP Chapter to Seat Officers,” *Arizona Republic*, January 20, 1961.

²²*Hearing Before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights*, pp. 49-59, 62-63. Brooks and Ragsdale interviews. Ragsdale confirmed that he played the “bad guy” in confrontations with employers.

²³Brooks interview.

²⁴Plotkin interview. In 1963, George Brooks was elected moderator of the predominantly white Presbytery of Phoenix, which had 15,500 members and fifty-two churches. His position no doubt helped him in the civil rights struggle. See “Negro Moderator for Presbytery,” *Arizona Republic*, January 12, 1963.

²⁵Brooks interview. Alden Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

²⁶Brooks interview. “Note Sent by Welfare Officer,” *Arizona Republic*, April 12, 1962, p. 11; “Complaint on Hiring Lodged,” *Phoenix Gazette*, April 24, 1962, p. 18.

²⁷Brooks interview.

²⁸Barbara Callahan interview, February 24, 1990. Blacks composed 15 percent of the Phoenix population in 1960. See Luckingham, *Phoenix*, p. 175.

²⁹Brooks, Callahan, Thomasena Grigsby, and Eugene Grigsby interviews. Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990), p. 167.

³⁰Waldman interview. Human Rights Commission, *First Annual Report . . . , 1963-64* (City of Phoenix, 1964), pp. 2-6.

³¹“King Calls for Nonviolent Action,” *Arizona Republic*, June 4, 1964, section A, p. 8. Brooks, Plotkin, and Ragsdale interviews. Nancy Phillips interview, March 2, 1990.

³²Grigsby interview.

³³Plotkin and Phillips interviews.

³⁴Plotkin, Brooks, Goode, Copeland, and Mahoney interviews.

³⁵Waldman interview. Luckingham, *Phoenix*, pp. 150-53.

³⁶Waldman interview. “Election Candidate Status, 1963,” pp. 9-11, in City of Phoenix File #3500, Arizona State Archives, Phoenix. Luckingham, *Phoenix*, p. 179. Waldman believes that the Act Committee had a direct effect on the CGC’s decision to integrate its slate of candidates.

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³⁷*Economic and Cultural Progress of the Negro* (New York: National Urban League, 1965), pp. 133-34. *Arizona Revised Statutes*, vol. 41, sections 1401-1442. Luckingham, *Phoenix*, p. 178; John Crow, *Discrimination, Poverty and the Negro: Arizona in the National Context* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1968), p. 3; Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, pp. 87-92.

³⁸Luckingham, *Phoenix*, pp. 213-14.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 214. Brooks interview.

⁴⁰Brooks interview. Luckingham, *Phoenix*, pp. 178, 215. Later critics said that much of the money went to fight crime rather than to boost anti-poverty programs.

⁴¹Copeland, Brooks, Plotkin, Goode, Mahoney, and Waldman interviews. Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Random House, 1980). Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), pp. 261-67, argues that black women were a dynamic force in the black church nationally, where they represented moral and social authority in decision-making. The church played an important role in the civil rights movement, and many black women pressured ministers to open their churches for movement activities.

⁴²Mahoney and Brooks interviews.

⁴³Finn interview.

⁴⁴Brooks, Callahan, Phillips, Plotkin, Goode, and Ragsdale interviews. William Mahoney believes that his civil rights activities influenced President John F. Kennedy to name him U.S. ambassador to Ghana in 1961.

CREDITS—The photo on p. 199 is courtesy of Lincoln Ragsdale; on p. 200 courtesy of Eugene and Thomasena Grigsby; on p. 202 courtesy of William P. Mahoney, Jr.; on p. 205 courtesy of the Reverend George Brooks; on p. 210 courtesy of Fran Waldman.