Florestine "Flo" Ware (1912-1981): A Community-Minded Change-Maker

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Although Florestine Ware, known by most as Flo Ware, grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, her legacy lies in Seattle (Henry, 1999). Very little public knowledge exists about her early life, but in her late twenties, she moved to Seattle and became a renowned civil rights and educational reform activist. Her work started with local political organizing directed towards Seattle Public Schools (SPS), where her children (and 20 foster children) were receiving what she considered a subpar education, and eventually culminated in an electoral campaign for a seat in the House of Representatives. By the 1950's, she had already made quite a name for herself, and was a highly coveted speaker; and yet, she refused to charge for her role in any speaking events. Her character is perhaps best encapsulated by the fact that, rather than profit from the community work she considered essential, she would wear a dress made entirely out of bath towels to political meetings on the occasions she was unable to afford clothing (Flo Ware, ca. 1980). Ware's steadfast fidelity to her values was such that even though she might have benefitted individually from payment, she refused to link her activism to the capitalist system undergirding classist and racist oppression. These values exposed Flo to considerable personal risk; as a black woman publicly championing socialist and otherwise left-wing ideologies in a United States political stage still defined by the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War, Flo was especially vulnerable to reactionary violence. The motivation behind Flo's work was clearly not personal gain, but rather an intrinsic altruism and solidarity with all oppressed people. Over the course of thirty years involved in Seattle activism, Flo Ware's unwavering dedication to prioritizing the collective well-being of her community over her individual material welfare epitomizes civic courage.

The catalyst for Flo's entrance into community organizing was when her husband, a student at the University of Washington, was fired from his job with the U.S. Post Office due to his involvement in the free university movement (Florestine Ware, 1981). The incident prompted a coming to consciousness of sorts for Flo, and although she didn't immediately immerse herself in activism, by 1952 she had taken up distributing informational cards about educational justice to prompt other parents at the local Horace Mann School to action. She was eventually arrested for her efforts; and yet, her arrest did not deter her from political involvement, rather acting as a symbolic baptism into a new life of community organizing. Much of Flo's future work can be tied back to the anti-racist ideologies and committment to educational dehierarchization influenced by the free university movement that she espoused in these first pamphlets. In her own words, the conditions of public schools, as they stood in the 1950's, "worked against kids who were black and poor," and Flo wanted this to change not only for her own children but for the children of everyone in her community (Florestine Ware, 1981). In response to the glaring injustices occurring in the school system due to uneven distribution of resources, Flo wrote community proposals for increased school funding, participated in the development of the Head Start preschool program and co-founded the Central Area School Council: all while being a full-time parent and operating a successful sandwich shop (Cobbins, 2018, p. 153, p. 152). Although the Central Area School Council had dissolved by 1981, it was highly "successful in bringing improvements to many local schools" in black communities (Swan, 2020). The Head Start preschool program, meanwhile, continues to be a meaningful program providing low income families with free child care and individualized educational preparation (*Head Start*, 2022).

In 1969, SPS reified Flo's role as a powerful voice within the Seattle educational community, hiring her to act as a consultant for a summer program instructing teachers on the values of school desegregation and the challenges of developing pedagogies for a newly diverse classroom (Cobbins, 2018, p. 153). Although this was a respected position, acting as the face of the black community in a setting in which the majority of the audience is white can cause a lot of socioemotional harm. As Dawn G. Williams and Venus Evans-Winters discuss in "The Burden of Teaching Teachers: Memoirs of Race Discourse in Teacher Education" (2005), teaching anti-racist pedagogies as a black woman means students who benefit from anti-blackness will often "resist the messenger" (p. 202). Reasonable critiques of white privilege can be met with defensiveness and even overt misogynoir. Furthermore, the white people in the classrooms of black women often refuse to trust their teachers as experts on their own lived experiences, falling into unconscious patterns of racism in which any truths shared about race have to be validated by another white person. William and Winters' experiences are in line with the cultural zeitgeist of the 2000's, decades after Jim Crow fell; one can only imagine how much more resistance and racist undermining Flo would have faced as one of the forerunners of educational integration. Nevertheless, she was passionate about spreading knowledge about the alarming educational disparities harming black students, and successfully imparted guidance on how to navigate the stark situational differences between white and black students (Cobbins, 2018, p. 153). Although de facto segregation (as opposed to de jure segregation, as was the case pre-Brown v. Board of Education) still exists to some extent in Seattle schools, the powerful impact of Flo and her fellows remains visible in the anti-racist practices implemented by SPS today. SPS's ongoing five year strategic plan "Seattle Excellence," for example, centers the unique needs of African American boys and teens in a manner that aligns with Flo's methodologies; the school district

has also made tangible efforts to hire a culturally responsive workforce to ensure that educators are best prepared to navigate the diverse sociopolitical contexts of their students (*Strategic Plan*, 2021).

Though supporting children, especially black and low-income children, would always be at the heart of Flo's politics, her activism transcended educational reform. In fact, after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death in 1968 meant that his Poor People's Campaign was left rudderless and unmoored, Flo took charge, leading a caravan of Seattle's marginalized community members all the way from Seattle to Washington D.C. However, despite the integrity of their cause, Flo quickly became disillusioned with the movement itself, noting that the infighting and disorganization as a result of King's death hindered the efficacy of the campaign (Prochnau, 1968). After the march, then, she therefore decided to shift focus to the Seattle branch of the Peace and Freedom Party, a socialist party that spoke to Flo and others like her who were dissatisfied with the passivity of Democrats towards black, queer, and women's liberation (*PFP*, 2021). Under the Peace and Freedom Party's banner, she would go on to run for the House of Representatives, aligning herself with the Black Panther Party and openly critiquing the stratification of the capitalist economic order (Cobbins, 2018, p. 155). In positioning herself as a face for such ideals, however, Flo put herself at considerable personal risk. From the late 50's to early 70's— around the same time period in which Flo was involved in political organizing— the FBI's illegal COINTELPRO program was active. COINTELPRO was a militant surveillance branch of the FBI which targeted groups the government considered subversive. In its most official capacity, COINTELPRO was created to protect the American capitalist status quo. White supremacy, however, is inherent to said status quo, and many of COINTELPRO's destabilizing tactics (including but not limited to psychological warfare, defamation, harassment, wrongful

imprisonment, and physical violence) were directed towards civil rights organizers like Flo (Churchill & Wall, 2001). Despite the looming threat of COINTELPRO and other forms of violent backlash, Flo persevered in her activism and in her role within the Peace and Freedom Party, viewing her campaign as an opportunity to transform the party and the ideologies behind it into a "real political force" ("Flo Ware, 1968). And, though ultimately Flo was not elected, it is undeniable that there was real political force to her campaign. The values Flo defended are the lifeblood of contemporary Seattle activism. It is her legacy that is honored and sustained by the Black Lives Matter Movement, that forms the foundation of local student organizing such as United Students Against Sweatshops at UW or the SU Total Abolition Coalition. And this legacy is a shared one: shared with her comrades, with her children. As Flo herself put it when presented with the Martin Luther King Jr. Humanitarian Award, her achievements were not individual, but rather belonging to the "people who have struggled in the community with [her]" (Harris 2020).

Over the course of her many years serving her community, it is unsurprising that Flo Ware built many strong relationships with those around her. After she passed away in 1981, many people took to the public stage to speak to her strength of character: memorable statements include Clayton A. Pitre's assertion that Flo truly "gave… herself to her country, the city, and the community," and Carl B. Heller's testimony to her "unusual personal courage and conviction" (Kutner, 2002). The eulogizing of her allies, peers, friends, and family was so powerful, in fact, that the Seattle city council was swayed to memorialize her. Today, Flo Ware Park at 28th & S. Jackson stands as a tangible reminder of her extraordinary, communal achievements (Henry, 1999). It is fitting that the monument erected in Flo's honor is a park. What commemorative

structure could better capture her commitment to community togetherness and to protecting the simple joys of childhood?

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