



Gloria Richardson Civil rights pioneer 1922 ——— 2021

by OLIVIA GAGAN

Unarmed, in jeans and a white shirt, a Black woman pushes a National Guardsman's bayonet-tipped rifle aside as she heads to mediate between police and protestors at a rally.

The photo, taken at a protest in Maryland in 1963, became an iconic image of the US civil rights movement, an emblem of the institutionalised dangers faced by Black people simply trying to move through society.

The woman was Gloria Richardson, a key American civil rights activist who has been largely under-reported in history.

Born in 1922, Richardson occupied a paradoxical space where she had more privileges than the vast majority of Black women in America, yet was still oppressed. She was part of an affluent, influential family who had been free people of colour since before the Civil War.

Gloria's parents owned a grocery store, a funeral home, and had a portfolio of rental properties, whilst her uncle was a prominent lawyer. This social, political, and economic capital gave her resources normally withheld from Black women: access to education, to money, and to a sense of entitlement and of a

right to take up space that was encouraged by her family.

Yet she was still subject to the racial injustices and segregation that prevailed at the time. Despite her family's wealth and privileges, Richardson's father died of a heart attack after he was unable to access a hospital that would accept Black people near his home.

Richardson gained a degree in sociology and then ran her family's businesses, raising two daughters and undergoing a divorce through her twenties and thirties; it wasn't until her early forties that she became the chair of the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee (CNAC). Whilst her father's death was a key catalyst in her determination to uphold the rights of Black people, she later said it was motherhood and her teenage daughters' own activism that fully politicised her.

Via CNAC, she led the critical 1961 Cambridge movement in Dorchester County, Maryland. After over three years of sit-ins in segregated public spaces—cinemas, bowling alleys, lunch counters—all public areas including schools and hospitals were finally desegregated. It is now viewed as a watershed moment in US civil rights and considered by many as the birth of

the Black Power movement.

Despite her personal focus on nonviolent protest, she supported Black peoples' right to defend themselves, making her an often-controversial bridge between the non-violent activism of Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr. and the more confrontational Black Power movement. She was arrested multiple times and received death threats from white supremacists before she left Cambridge to live in Harlem with her second husband. There, she worked for non-profits and New York City's Department for the Aging.

Fellow activist Joyce Ladner said of Richardson and her work: 'Gloria didn't give a damn what you said about her. She wasn't impressed with King, Kennedy, or anybody else. She considered herself to be as good as these guys were, if not better. Gloria was a card. If you had Gloria on your side, you didn't need anybody else.'

In one of her last interviews, in late 2020, Richardson's advice for women seeking change today was to 'fight for what you believe in. But stop being so nice.'