

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

Lafayette M. Hershaw

educator

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”

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Background Information

Born: May 10, 1863; Died: September 2, 1945

Hershaw was born in Clay County, North Carolina. He learned to speak and read French, German, and Spanish. He attended Atlanta University and graduated from the school in 1886. Later, he attended Howard University to study law and graduated in 1892. On July 11, 1888 he married Charlotte Monroe and the pair had three daughters, Rosa Cecile, Alice May, and Fay M. Charlotte.

Hershaw's Resistance

Hershaw began his career as a teacher and principal of the Gate City School in the Atlanta Public School Service District. He denounced the Glenn Bill that mandated all schools be segregated by race. In 1889, he was fired for expressing how the education quality was much poorer for African Americans in the South than in the North. He moved to Washington, D.C. to further his career and began working for the United States Civil Service. He also became involved in the urban Black community. In 1897, he presented a study that detailed the high mortality rate of African Americans living in urban communities. Hershaw presented his findings during the Third Atlanta Conference, later documented in local newspapers. The conference, which was orchestrated by W.E.B. Du Bois, gathered leading Black voices from across the country in order to discuss civil rights and issues of race in America. Hershaw was a founding member of the Niagara Movement, which served as a platform for African American activists to convey their views. Alongside several others, he established the D.C. branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.¹

Achievements

Although Hershaw's unapologetic stance on ensuring educational equity was extended to African American communities came at a great price to his career, Hershaw was committed to change. He was a trustee of the Historically Black College, Atlanta University. In 1897, he was appointed as President of the Bethel Historical and Literacy Association. Hershaw served as an Executive Board member of the American Negro Academy.

¹ Wikipedia contributors. (2021, January 1). Lafayette M. Hershaw. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lafayette_M._Hershaw

Essential Questions

1. During his career, Hershaw studied about the high mortality rate of African Americans living in urban and rural areas. Similar studies have been done throughout each generation as a means to explain why violence happens within and around Black communities.
 - a. Do these types of studies bring positive outcomes to Black communities or do they reinforce stereotypes of African Americans?
 - b. Can well intentioned studies or tv shows (ie. “First 48”) bring more harm than good?

2. Hershaw lost his job after being vocal about school segregation and its effects on Black students, teachers and their communities. He subsequently forced to move and find other work.
 - a. Should professionals risk their careers in order to bring awareness to the disparities in their field?
 - b. What are the consequences of not being vocal about disparities?

3. ***“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”***
 - a. Given what you know about Hershaw, how did he live out this quote with his actions?
 - b. In what situations should you push aside fear and speak your truth?