

Women Voices: An Oral History of DC Women



Virginia Ali came to DC in the early 1950s from Essex County, VA, and found work at the Industrial Bank. After marriage to Ben Ali, they opened Ben Chili's Bowl on U Street. The restaurant survived the destruction to the neighborhood after the rioting in 1968 and later the disruption to the corridor by the Metro construction. Mrs. Ali, affectionately known as "Mom," is a well-know community leader and has served on numerous boards. Today the entire Ali family run this DC and national landmark.

Jackie Bong-Wong fled Viet Nam with her children in 1975 after the assassination of her husband, Nguyen Van Bong. After hardships and struggles, she established a career in DC fighting against human trafficking and providing aid to the local Vietnamese immigrant community. She married a Foreign Service officer and after graduation from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, she began her own diplomatic career.



Janie Boyd came to DC from South Carolina in 1952. Throughout those years she has actively engaged with city leaders to improve conditions for her community. She recalls how she graphically proved to Mayor Walter Washington that a Safeway store in her African American neighborhood was selling rotten meat. She is a gleaner at area farms helping to provide healthy food to DC's underserved and marginalized communities.

Lena Bradley, a North Carolina native, learned business skills at Howard University's School of Business. Trained as a cosmetologist, she took advantage of a business opportunity and purchased an existing salon in DC. At first, she and her husband lived above the shop, but eventually she bought her dream home "all on one floor" where she currently resides. Amora Campbell, her great-niece, conducted the interview and used it to create *A Quick Guide to Oral History* training video for high school students.



Vivian Coard, who celebrated her 104th birthday in August, 2020, recounts the story of her birth at 4 pounds and how her Cherokee grandmother kept her alive in the pocket of an apron. A graduate of Dunbar High School and Miner Teachers College, she had a successful career working for the Army in the Pentagon for 35 years. After hours, she sold real estate but her real passion was playing bridge. She continues to play bridge and is a sought out teacher as well at her retirement community.

Eleanor Compton grew up on a 100-acre tobacco farm in North Carolina. After high school, she moved to Norfolk, VA for greater opportunities just as World War II was beginning. She worked in blueprints at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard, and took business classes. After the war, she moved to DC and worked at the National Security Administration and later at the national headquarters of the Communication Workers of America. She joined the WNDC in 1980 and has been an active member for 40 years.





Alice Davis, a native Washingtonian, can trace her ancestry back five generations to the Civil War. A graduate of Dunbar High School and Miner Teachers College, she joined the Delta Sigma Theta sorority in 1940. She represented the national Deltas during the production of “Countdown to Kusini,” the first commercial film by African American women, and locally, helped to launch Delta Towers, an apartment building for seniors and the disabled. Besides the work for her sorority, she has served on numerous boards for several DC mayors.

Alice Day has dual US/Australian citizenship, where she and her husband, Lincoln Day, spent a total of 23 years before retiring to DC in 1993. An educator, writer and demographer by training, she and her husband authored *Too Many Americans* in 1964. Both life-long environmental activists they partnered again in 2008 to produce the award-winning documentary, “Scarred Lands and Wounded Lives: The Environmental Footprint of War.”



Verda Deutscher and her husband Irwin, married for 70 years, retired to DC in 1980. In the 1940’s at graduate school, she began a lifetime of activism as a participant in sit-ins against racial discrimination in Columbia, Missouri. After serving in the Army in World War II, she had a long career as a social worker and activist for civil right causes. She prefers to refer to herself simply as a humanitarian. Retirement for this active senior meant volunteering at four organizations.

Jewell Fenzi’s life work was with the Foreign Service. She authored *Married to the Foreign Service* in 1964 and wrote two cookbooks, while posted in Curacao and Brazil. She was the catalyst behind the Spouse Oral History project for the Associations of the American Foreign Service Worldwide and created the oral history program for the Educational Foundation at the WNDC. In 2000, she and Allida Black published *Democratic Women, An Oral History of the Woman’s National Democratic Club*.



Eva Freund’s life was shaped by her childhood during the Depression. She never let anything or anyone put her down, not polio when she was 10 years old, or a DC university professor asking her to leave his class because she was a woman. She became an activist in the local chapter of the National Organization for Women and the nascent LGBT movement. She established her own business providing independent verification and validation services.

Shirley Henderson came to DC from her home in Florida to attend Dunbar High School. In 1965 she returned with her family and served as a volunteer with numerous organizations, including as President of YWCA of the National Capital Area and of the Retired Senior Volunteer Corps. During her tenure as the President of the Woman’s National Democratic Club, 1990 to 1992, she helped to establish the Educational Foundation.





Georgia Herron learned to love nature growing up on her father's 200-acre farm near Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. After Dunbar High School and Miner Teachers College, she spent a long career as a beloved and renowned teacher of science in the DC public school system. Recognized as distinguished alumnae by the University of the District of Columbia, the university created the Georgia J. Herron Spirit Award in 2015.

Tina Hobson arrived in DC at the start of the Kennedy Administration. Career advancement and leadership opportunities were becoming available to women and as stated in her interview "she was at the right place at the right time." Her courtship and eventual marriage in 1969 to civil rights activist Julius Hobson was surveilled by the FBI. Early on she saw climate change as a major environmental threat and after forced retirement during the Reagan administration she worked to advance solar energy.



Evelyn Idelson developed her policy and advocacy skills as a civil rights activist in California during the 1950s when she founded a coalition for minority groups. Settling in DC in 1960, she had a 30-year career at the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as she said "organizing, coordinating, administering and communicating to achieve social program goals." During her tenure she was responsible for the development of two manuals for employers on how to comply with EEOC laws.

Florence Robin Isbell had a long career in civil rights starting in New York City during World War II as the secretary to Roger Baldwin, founder of the ACLU. In the mid-1960s, she helped found an ACLU chapter in Georgia. Later she served as Executive Director of the ACLU affiliate in DC before returning to New York City to work for the national ACLU. She returned to DC to work for the Lawyers Committee for Civil Right Under Law before retiring in her mid 70s.



Betty Lichtenstein is a native Washingtonian. Married in 1945 at the Sixth and I Synagogue, she and Harold Lichtenstein started married life in a small rundown apartment, part of the Army barracks near DC's Bowling Field. She worked for several federal government agencies generally in the field of mental health and was a 40-year volunteer with Recovery International.

Ruth Lubic had a long and groundbreaking nursing career in New York City setting up birthing centers. She spent part of the funds from her 1993 McArthur Fellowship to relocate to DC to open a birthing clinic and child development center in an abandoned Safeway store at the Hechinger Mall in Ward 5. At the time, DC had the highest infant mortality in the country. Dr. Lubic continues to promote freestanding birthing centers worldwide.





Dorothy Marschak returned to DC in 1984 as a consultant to the World Bank after a distinguished academic career in economics and statistics. Founder of CHIME (Community Help in Music Education) she organized music education and instruction in DC public schools. She was the impetus behind the 2007 exhibit, “Banding Together, School Bands as Instruments of Opportunity” at the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum.

Marcelina Maynard left her native Dominican Republic in 1972 for greater opportunities in DC. Working long hours and multiple jobs, eventually she was able to bring all seven of her children to join her in her Mount Pleasant home. For 17 years she worked as a housekeeper for the Mayflower Hotel, earning many awards, including the Room Keeper of the Year in 1989 for her exceptional service to the traveling public.



Mary Lee McIntyre grew up outside of Philadelphia during the Depression with strong southern roots. She first experienced DC for a semester as an undergraduate. A graduate of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, she served in the Foreign Service, first as a spouse, then after her husband’s death in the 1983 embassy bombing in Beirut, on her own with US Agency for International Development.

Rosemary Monagan, came to DC in 1975 as the mother of five and wife of a Congressman from Connecticut. She volunteered at the White House during the Clinton presidency and restored ancient pottery for the Smithsonian Institution for 36 years. After the 9/11 tragedy, as president of the WNDC, she helped arrange a series of programs to educate members about the Islamic faith.



Elaine Newman, a Chicagoan by birth, came to DC with her family in the early 1960s. Her career centered on labor issues, civil rights, and women’s empowerment. As Executive Director of the Maryland Commission for Women during the 1970s, she helped many women get trained and obtain gainful employment. She joined the WNDC (her husband, Winn, was the first male member) and was active serving on the board arranging speakers for the Program Committee.

Maria-Teresa Otero was raised in La Paz by a Bolivian mother and an American father. She and her extended family of 22 came to DC when the World Bank hired her husband. When the last child started school, she taught Spanish for parochial schools and at a community center. Her long-time home in Chevy Chase, MD, remains a gathering place for her extended family and DC’s Bolivian community.



Henrietta Price moved from Virginia to DC with her family when she was six years old. She fondly recalls the social scene during the 1950s and shopping for clothes at the Hecht Company. During her long career as a social worker with the DC Department of Human services, she placed many people in good paying entry-level positions. She was one of the original members of the Metropolitan Women’s Democratic Club in the early 1960s.

Kathy Schmidt was outraged at her loss of voting representation in Congress as a DC citizen when she and her husband Al retired and moved from Connecticut to Mount Pleasant. She took that outrage and channeled it into years of volunteering for the local chapter of the League of Women's Voters and the new organization, DC Vote, ultimately receiving the latter's Champion of Democracy Award in 2010.



Eleanor Seagraves recalls her days as a young child growing up in The People's House, as her grandmother, Eleanor Roosevelt, called The White House. She worked as a librarian in the DC public school system and as an editor for numerous publications while she and her husband raised their three children in Shepherd Park. For many years she served as the WNDC's librarian in the library named after her grandmother.

Joan Thomas left Atlanta, GA, and moved to DC to live with her sisters when she was a teenager. For 31 years she worked as a social worker for the Federal and District governments. Her passion was always service and political activism. Her many leadership roles include the first African American Gray Lady for the Red Cross; President of the local chapter of the American War Mothers; Commissioner for her Advisory Neighborhood Commission; and, captain of her voting prescient for 46 years.



Alice Uda Vetter and her family were American citizens of Japanese ancestry living in Sacramento, CA in 1941 when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Forced from their home, they were sent to live under armed guard and harsh conditions in an Arkansas internment camp. She and her family settled in DC in 1968 and worked in housing and community development. In 1978 she became the Executive Director of a nonprofit housing developer for low and moderate households called MUSCLE