

The Norman Juneteenth Committee presents:

Norman Legends

This exhibit aims to tell the stories of legendary African American educators, leaders and citizens in our city; many of whom were the first to break a barrier and access an element of society previously barred to Black folks. The obstacles and successes of these community members underscore the rich history of diversity, resilience and innovation in Norman.

George W. McLaurin

1948



George W. McLaurin was the first African American to attend the University of Oklahoma. As a retired Langston University faculty member, Mr. McLaurin attended classes in the College of Education doctoral program in education in 1950 but was forced to remain physically separated from other students in the classroom, cafeteria and library. His court case pressing for an educational experience equal to other students' experience was argued in the U.S. Supreme Court and led to a reversal of the "separate but equal" legal standard and was a key case leading to Brown v. Board of Education.

In 1949, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher became the first African American student admitted to OU Law. Her admission to law school, however, was preceded by a three-year legal battle. At the time of her application to OU's law school in January 1946, Oklahoma schools were segregated, and she was denied admission on racial grounds. With the support of civic leaders and grassroots supporters, Fisher challenged the decision through the court system, ultimately reaching the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled unanimously in her favor. Fisher was finally admitted to the OU College of Law on June 18, 1949. Her landmark case laid the groundwork for the elimination of segregation in public education nationwide. After graduating from the OU College of Law in 1951, Fisher practiced law in Chickasha and later joined the faculty at Langston University.

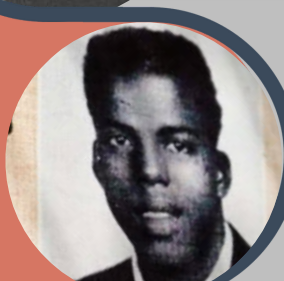


Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher

1949

Etta & Don Johnson

1956



Etta and her brother Don Johnson were the first Black students to integrate the Norman Public Schools by attending Norman High School in 1956. The siblings helped pave the way for future generations. After graduating, Etta had a long career with Lucent Technologies in Oklahoma City. Don returned to Norman after college to work and then own a small business, Bob's Seat Cover Shop, which he operated successfully until retiring in April 2007.

Gault became the first African American to play football at the University of Oklahoma and went on to become a respected athletic administrator, first as an assistant commissioner with the Big Eight Conference and then as a special assistant to the commissioner of the Big Twelve Conference. The University's academic and career services support center for student-athletes is named for Dr. Gault, the Prentice Gault Academic Center.



Prentice Gault, Ph.D.

1957

Melvin B. Tolson, Jr., Ph.D.

1964



Melvin B. Tolson, Jr., Ph.D., was OU's first full-time African-American faculty member and taught French at the University for more than thirty years. He also was one of the founders of what was initially called the Afro-American Student Union, now the Black Student Association. In 2002, the University named the Henderson-Tolson Cultural Center in honor of Dr. Tolson and Dr. George Henderson.

The Hendersons are the first African American couple to purchase a home in Norman. George Henderson, Ph.D., joined the University of Oklahoma faculty in 1967 and has authored over 30 books. In 1969, he founded the Department of Human Relations, in which he served as director. Mrs. Barbara Henderson was the first chairperson of the Norman Human Rights Commission and has been a steadfast community advocate for years. Their leadership continues to shape Norman today.



Barbara & Dr. George Henderson

1967

George Shirley

1970



George Shirley, born in Tompkinsville in 1939, served as the Norman personnel director for more than 20 years, helping to pave the way for many of the activists, leaders and civil servants of the city. He retired in his early 60's, among some controversy, but is credited with hiring numerous Black employees in Norman during a heightened time of low economic mobility and limited access to particular areas of the workforce.

Booker Shackleford began his career in Law Enforcement as the first African American Police Officer with the Norman Police Department in 1972 after graduating from the University of Oklahoma. He served Norman for nearly 30 years, where he resided with his wife and four children.



Booker Shackleford

1972

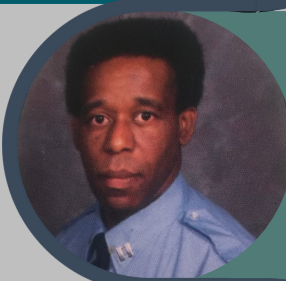
Charlotte Shoate Gordan

1974



Charlotte Shoate Gordon began her career in education in 1974 as the first African American teacher in the Norman Public Schools system. She spent 16 years teaching before transitioning into various counseling, administrative, consulting, library, supervisory, and mentoring roles. As a principal for Fisher Elementary School, Gordon led the school to become a Blue Ribbon School recipient and was recognized by the Oklahoma State Department of Education for achieving superior standards of academic excellence.

Gregory C. Watts was the first African American firefighter/Captain for the City of Norman Fire Department. Captain Watts started his career in 1979 as a firefighter and retired in 2001 as the first African American Captain for the City of Norman Fire Department. At the time of his retirement, the Norman Fire Department employed 124 staff, and five of them were African American.



Captain Gregory C. Watts

1976

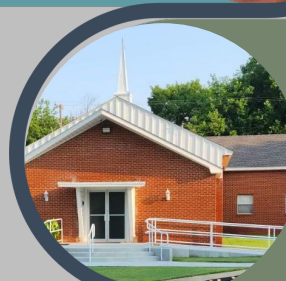
Teresa Turner

1978



Teresa Turner, originally from South Carolina, attended OU in 1978. As one of the first two Black women to earn a full athletic scholarship, Turner impacted the Norman community both through basketball and her 20-year career as an administrator. With her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and her Master's in Guidance and Counseling, Turner guided and mentored hundreds of students during her tenure. She is also passionate about community engagement, and has served as a member of the City of Norman Human Rights Commission, and on the board of directors for the United Way of Norman and the Cleveland County YMCA.

Community Missionary Baptist Church was the first African American church in Norman Oklahoma. In the '70s, Emma Wright pioneered a mission for many gatherings of fellowship within the community, which led to the establishment of the church on April 27, 1980. On July 27, 1980, Reverend Jesse Woodfork was installed as Community Missionary Baptist Church's first Pastor. This church remains important to many Norman community members today.



Community Missionary Baptist Church

1980

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Steven Hardeman started his career with the City of Norman in 1984 as a Water Line Maintenance Worker. In 1987, he transferred to the Norman Wastewater Pollution Facility as the first African American operator. Progressing through his career, he became the plant Supervisor in 2004 and now manages all day-to-day operations at the Water Reclamation Facility and leads a staff of 20 team members. In 2010, he became the first African American plant Superintendent in Norman and the State of Oklahoma. In 2023, he was presented with the Oklahoma Environmental Association's (OWEA) Lifetime Achievement Award.



Steve Hardeman

1984

Chief Fred Lee Henderson, Jr.

1985



Fred Lee Henderson, Jr. started his fire service career with the City of Norman Fire Department in 1985 as a firefighter. In 2001, he was promoted to Fire Inspector, and in 2003, he became a Norman Police Peace Officer. During his tenure as Fire Inspector, he received other accolades, including Oklahoma Fire Investigator of the Year. In 2010, Henderson was promoted to Fire Marshal and became the first African American Chief Officer for the City of Norman Fire Department.

Samuel Woodfork started his career on October 27, 1987, as the Deputy Assessor of the Cleveland County Assessors Department. This department surveys numerous properties within the community to determine their real estate value. Today, he is serving in this Department as the second Deputy to the County Assessor and Chief Information Officer. Sam has dedicated over thirty years to this field.



Samuel "Sam" Woodfork

1987

Anita Hill

1989



Anita Hill, born to farmers and the youngest of 13, became the first tenured African American professor at OU. She left the university in 1996 due to ongoing calls for her resignation that began after her 1991 U.S. Supreme Court nomination testimony. Still, Hill went on to have an illustrious career in teaching and contributed significantly to the field of gender and race studies as a proponent for women's rights and feminism. She holds several honorary doctorates and was inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame in 1993.

John Blake is OU's first Black head coach in any sport, and the only one to ever lead the OU football team. His three Sooner teams combined for a 12-22 record, going 3-8 in 1996, 4-8 in 1997 and 5-6 in 1998. He'd been a part of four different college staffs and two NFL teams — the Dallas Cowboys and the Buffalo Bills — as a defensive line coach. He was also a reliable nose guard for Barry Switzer's Sooners from 1979-82. Throughout his career as a player and a coach, Blake's skill in recruiting eventual OU legends, is still hailed to this day.



John Blake

1996

Anthony Francisco

1996



In 1996, Anthony Francisco became the City of Norman's first African American Chief Financial Officer and second City Department Head. In this capacity, he oversees the City's budget, accounting, treasury, debt administration, investment, printing services, utility customer service, payroll, and purchasing functions. Before his appointment in Norman, he served for over 13 years in public finance and administrative positions across the country, and was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame for Municipal Officials in 2013.

Rickey J. Knighton II is an Assistant City Attorney III for the City of Norman, Oklahoma. He received his Juris Doctor from the University of Oklahoma in 1996. He began his relationship with the Norman City Attorney's Office during his second year in law school as a volunteer mediation coordinator. Rick was hired as a legal intern in the Norman City Attorney's Office in 1997 and was later hired as a full-time Assistant City Attorney.



Rickey J. Knighton II

1997

Chief Keith Humphrey

2011



Keith Humphrey was selected as the Chief of Police for the Norman Police Department in 2011 and served until 2019. Chief Humphrey brought with him several years of experience and set forth many initiatives, including implementing officer training on diversity and inclusion as a strategy to combat the growing public concern towards real and perceived law enforcement abuses.

James Chappel was appointed as the Norman Ward 5 City Councilman in 2016, aiming to display a measured and judicious approach to the responsibilities that come with representing and serving others. Mr. Chappel and his wife, Claudia, have continued to be involved over the last 30 years with community causes, serving on local, state, and national boards and committees. Mr. Chappel still serves as a Board Member for Norman Regional Health Authority and Norman Regional Health System Foundation, chairman for Bethesda Inc, and Deacon for the Community Missionary Baptist Church.



James Chappel

2016

While there are many whose excellence and contributions we may never know, they are no less important to our history.

As a community, we come together to honor, celebrate and continue the legacy of achievement of those that came before us, both big and small. When we speak out against injustice, support our neighbors, and strive to reach new heights, we demonstrate the resilience and perseverance of our ancestors.

There's no one way to be Black and no one way to contribute to the fabric of this country. Each of us gives a gift to the world and the Norman community when we stand in our talents and give permission to those that come after us to do the same.