

A Historical Birthday

By: Monia S. Turley

In January 2011, we celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. In February of that same year, we celebrated "Black History Month." All truly wonderful events! Contributors to our newsletters and other sponsored events brought forth recognition and ceremonial embrace of the excellent work of those who have gone before us in the annals of time in the fight for equality and justice. I would like to bring your attention to another important upcoming historical event that will take place this year - July 1, 2011 marks the 50th birthday of the West Virginia Human Rights Commission!

House Bill 115, which originated in the House Committee on the Judiciary, was passed by the Legislature on March 6, 1961, effective July 1, 1961 and approved by then Governor William Barron. The Act amended Chapter Five of the Code of West Virginia, one thousand, nine hundred thirty-one, as amended, adding a new article, designated article eleven, which created and established the West Virginia Human Rights Commission and provided for its personnel, powers, functions and services to administer the West Virginia Human Rights Act, as amended. (Legislative Services)

At that time, the Commission received and considered discrimination complaints involving employment and places of public accommodations based on a person's race, color, religion, national origin and ancestry. Since then, there have been significant amendments to the West Virginia Human Rights Act, adding protected classes and strengthening the powers of the Commission, including its powers as an enforcement authority.

The first physical address of the Commission was *451 State Capitol Building, Charleston, West Virginia 25305*, which is now a small committee room in the main capitol building. Through the echoes of time, the Commission moved at least four times before landing at its present location at Plaza East on Morris Street. (Staff Members, Annual Reports) The first Executive Director was Howard W. McKinney, appointed in 1962, and the first Chairman of the Commission was Thomas W. Gavett. McKinney is credited with pioneering the establishment of local human rights commissions, to which there were twenty-four county human rights commissions. (5th Annual Report)

Sometimes, it's beneficial to reflect on our origins, to know where we came from, where we are and, because of our beginnings, where we are going. I received a call some time ago from another Human Rights Commission. The employee asked me how long the West Virginia Human Rights Commission had been in existence and it sparked my interest. I immediately started researching and even though I knew the year, I had significant difficulties finding any exact dates. Though often ignored, exact dates are extremely important to our foundations.

After several months of research and contact with numerous sources, I received confirmation for the dates of the Commission's origins. I, personally, have been with the Commission since October 16, 1984, and I never realized how old the agency was and that I have been working here for over half of its existence. I was further surprised that I share my 50th

birthday this year with the Commission I serve. I also learned that West Virginia was one of just 26 states to form commissions charged with enforcing fair employment laws at that time. It was a position that was desperately warranted since, according to our Commission's own First Annual Report, "in 1961, 50 percent of restaurants, 70 percent of hotels and motels, and 85 percent of pools in the state still discriminated against African Americans."

As this momentous event approaches, I encourage reflection on and celebration of the work of the many wonderful people who have come before us and those of us who continue in service to the West Virginia Human Rights Commission and its mission. I challenge you, dear reader, to renew your efforts in keeping the Commission a positive entity to continue helping those who are in need of our services. Only three current staff members remain from the original crew of personnel predating the Allen Mandamus of 1984 - Monia S. Turley (27 years), Yodora P. Booth (22 years), and Marshall P. Moss (20 years). The Allen Mandamus was a landmark decision issued by the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals in December 1984. With its decision, it created substantial change to the operation of the Commission and the way in which cases of discrimination are processed. It authorized the Commission to seek services from any state agency in the processing of those claims and placed guidelines whereby certain functions were to be completed at the Commission. It also brought about a close interactive association with the State's Office of the Attorney General and caused the creation of a special division of that agency, the Civil Rights Division, whose attorneys would litigate cases on behalf of the Commission. This important decision has shaped the way the Commission operates and continues to this day.

Throughout the years, I have been privileged to work with and be a part of the Commission's mission to educate and seek to eradicate discrimination. It is a cause that has been dear to me since, as a young white girl in fifth grade in 1971, I first learned that people were discriminated against and treated horribly simply because of the color of their skin. I lovingly remember and thank Mr. Jackson for the enlightenment. Mr. Jackson was the first black teacher in a predominately white school who fought against racial discrimination throughout the height of the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s and 70s. He eventually, through the continued efforts of himself and those like him who fought for equality in employment, paved the way for equality in the school systems of Cleveland, Ohio for other teachers like himself.

Since the years when I was educated as to the existence of discrimination, I have watched it change - from bold and brazen to subtle - but realize that, even after all these years, hatred never stops and discriminatory animus continues in 2011. Thankfully, I have also been able to witness the laws combatting discrimination and those persons fighting to eradicate it and educate others, soldier on. Although the Commission is small, notoriously and historically underfunded, and though I never gained wealth by working as an employee of the Commission, I have gained great satisfaction in knowing that I have lived a life of service to the people of West Virginia and have helped the great people of this state achieve equality in their jobs, their homes, and places that they patronize. There have been many trials I have surpassed throughout the years - and many times I have thought of quitting - but each time I came back to what I was working toward, and what I strive for to this day. Working for the Commission has not just been a job, but the ability for me to make a difference in the lives of

those who have been unjustly treated or discriminated against for such narrow-minded reasons. It is something I never lost my zeal for and hope I take with me.

I'm thankful for this search which allowed me to discover the roots of the West Virginia Human Rights Commission's history. Through these efforts I was led to a source (Archives and History) which allowed me to update the Commission's archives of Annual Reports with the first, crucial and historic, six years. I was thrilled to be able to complete a project that I have been working on for the last four years and to read the very first Annual Report of the Commission.

Of course, as it has been said many times, the rest is history. How have you helped shape it?

Monia S. Turley
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Sources:

Legislative Services

Archives and History

Secretary of State's Office

Former and Current Employees of the Commission

Historical Documentation

First Annual Report of the WV Human Rights Commission 1961-1962

Fifth Annual Report of the WV Human Rights Commission 1965-1966

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