

PLEASED TO CELEBRATE VIOLET PAULINE KING HENRY - FIRST BLACK CANADIAN WOMAN LAWYER

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Violet Pauline King Henry was a woman of many firsts. She was the first Black person to graduate law school in Alberta, the first Black person to be called to the bar in Alberta, and the first Black woman to serve as a lawyer in Canada.

Born in Calgary in 1929, Violet was one of four siblings raised by a rail porter and seamstress. Her determination to practice law started young – her high school yearbook said “Violet wants to be a criminal lawyer.”

Violet did as she said: teaching piano to finance her undergraduate degree, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1952. She went on to become the only woman in her law class, earning an LLP in 1953.

Violet got her first taste of criminal law as an articling student in Calgary, where she worked on five murder trials in that one year. She was called to the bar on June 2, 1954 – making history and sparking headlines about the significant milestone.

She then practiced law in Calgary for a number of years. During that time, she spoke publicly at least once about the racism and sexism she had faced, describing the challenges women and people of colour face in the workplace, during a speech at a banquet for the Beta Sigma Phi sorority in 1955. She expressed hope that one day race and gender would matter less, and said, “It is too bad that a Japanese, Chinese or colored girl has to outshine others to secure a position.”

Violet went on to join the public service in Ottawa, where she spent seven years in the federal department of immigration. She then immigrated to the United States where she achieved another first – become the first woman named to an executive position on the National Council of the YMCA in 1976.

Violet died of cancer at the age of 51 in 1982 in New York City.

Her inroads paved the way for generations of young black and female lawyers to follow. Her awareness of the inequities of her age and the work to be done remain important lessons today for all of us as we embrace a



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renewed commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion across the legal profession.

McMillan LLP is pleased to celebrate Violet Pauline King Henry as an Agent of Change. Her exceptional career and legacy deserve to be honoured and remembered by Canadians for generations to come.