

26th Annual Pauli Murry Award

Four Carrboro winners acknowledged for commitment to social justice

By Janell Smith
Editor

“True community is based upon equality, mutuality and reciprocity. It affirms the richness of individual diversity as well as the common human ties that bind us together.”

These are the words of the late Rev. Dr. Anna Pauline “Pauli” Murray, a civil rights activist from Durham.

On Sunday, Feb. 28, the Orange County Human Relations Commission recognized four Orange County residents who have carried on the legacy of Pauli Murray through their commitment to fostering true community in the 26th Annual Pauli Murray Human Relation Awards.

The awards fell on the second to last day of Orange County’s Human Relations Month and the same day as the 88th Academy Awards. The Oscars have been widely criticized for lack of diversity, failing to nominate actors of color for the top four categories.

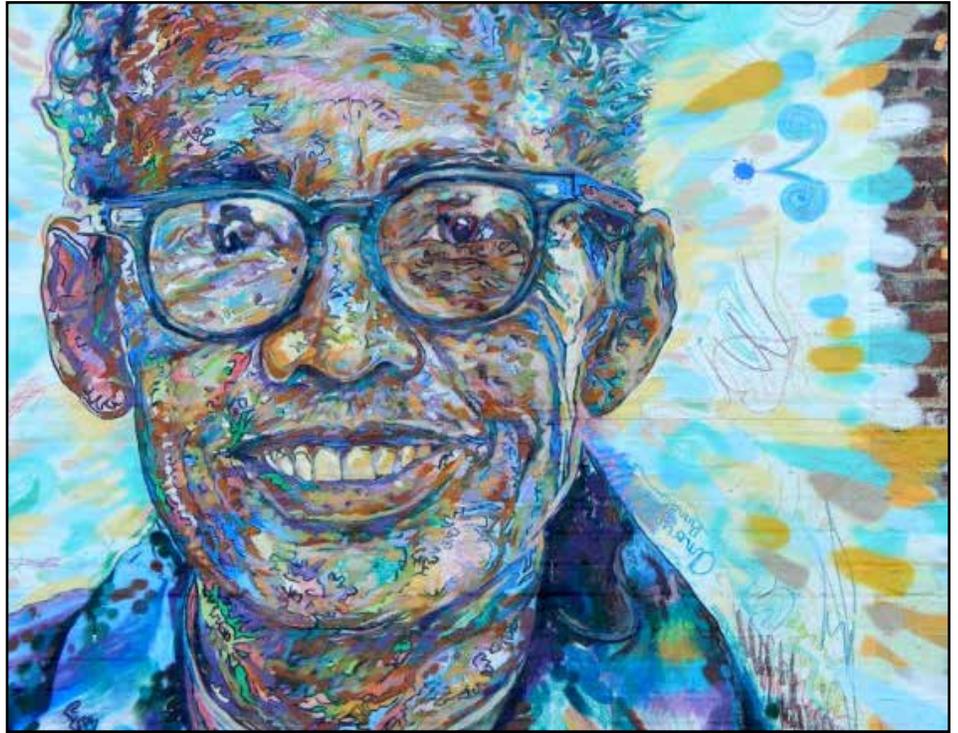
“The Pauli Murray Awards were started as a way to honor people in Orange County who’ve worked for social justice and to give awards in the same fashion as the Motion Picture Academy gives awards for their own best actors and actresses,” said Gerald Ponder, the chair of the Human Relations Commission.

The Winners

Ponder said the awards are given annually to local heroes and heroines who fight every day for the underserved and underrepresented of Orange County.

This year’s four winners — two youth and two individuals — were awarded for their exemplary commitment to social justice.

Ruth George and Linnea Van Manen, East Chapel Hill High School students, were the youth recipients of the Pauli Murray Award. They were honored for



Pauli Murray is painted in the mural “True Community,” on 313 Foster St. in Durham, N.C, and emerged from the Face Up: Telling Stories of Community Life collaborative public art project. (Staff photo by Janell Smith)

their work with marginalized communities, including refugee and LGBTQ students.

Dr. Deborah Stroman, adjunct associate professor at UNC-Chapel Hill’s Kenan-Flagler Business School, was one of two individual recipients of the Pauli Murray Award. Stroman was recognized for her concerted efforts to improve race relations on UNC-CH’s campus, while relying on her faith.

Stroman’s friend and co-worker Marco Barker said her faith has played an important role in her activism.

“I know that she believes in her faith and, that for her, it has been a source of strength that I know of,” Barker said. “And I know that it has also been a place of refuge, particularly when she’s had to make difficult decisions and have difficult dialogue.”

In receiving her award, Stroman quoted Peter Levine, a trauma expert and author.

“If you bring forth that which is within you, then that which is within you will be your salvation. If you do not bring forth that which is within you, then that which is within you will

destroy you,” Stroman said. “I’ve come full circle in trusting that my activism and my service is my salvation.”

Reyna Rivera, a social worker at Carrboro Elementary School, was the final individual recipient of the Pauli Murray award. Rivera created the community organizing and leadership development course, Mujeres Unidas y Activas, for Spanish-speaking mothers and revived the Radical Interventions for Student Equity, the African American parent leadership program.

A native of Puerto Rico, Rivera lived a life dedicated to social justice abroad. She lived in Mexico where she participated in the Zapatista Movement, helping indigenous peoples and poor farmworkers fight for basic rights, including land ownership, education and peace.

“As I made the decision to leave what are comforts — materialistic comforts — to go live in the mountains, there was a quote that guided me and continues to,” Rivera said upon receiving her award. “It says: Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know.

Build with what they have. And, with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people themselves will say, 'We have done this ourselves.'"

Rivera added that building true community and family through her work is so important because she was once orphaned.

In addition to receiving awards, the honorees received a personal copy of Murray's autobiography, "Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet."

About the Pauli

In her lifetime, Pauli Murray wore many hats.

She was born on Nov. 20, 1910, in Baltimore, Maryland, into a life of hardship. Both of her parents died when she was a young girl. But by the time of her death in 1985, Murray had become a distinguished civil rights activist, women's rights activist, lawyer, author, poet, professor and priest.

Some of her accomplishments include becoming the first African-American female priest to be ordained by the Protestant Episcopal Church, founding the National Organization for Women (NOW), serving on President John F. Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women Committee, serving as the vice president of Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, among other things.

"Pauli Murray was probably the most important figure of the Civil Rights Movement that you never knew," Ponder said. "Almost no one knows about Pauli Murray, but she was an amazing woman.

"We are honored to give this award in her name to help cement her legacy."

Murray's legacy reaches wide and has deep roots in Orange County.

Stephanie Davis, Murray's cousin, attended the award's ceremony and talked about the discovery of a handwritten land deed of Thomas and Sarah Fitzgerald, Murray's maternal great-grandparents. Davis said Murray's family has owned land in Orange County since buying their home and farmland on April 24, 1869. Davis and her family took a trip to the land where the Fitzgerald family farm was formerly located.

"I want you to know what an amazing, awesome, inspiring day that was for us," Davis said. We honestly felt something special in the air, just being on the land where our ancestors lived

and worked in Orange County."

In 1914, Murray moved to Durham after the death of her mother and was raised by aunt Pauline Fitzgerald Dame, after whom she was named. She received her high school diploma from Hillside High School in 1926. In 1938, she is sought admission to UNC-CH as a graduate student but was rejected because of her race.

This rejection sparked an irrevocable and important lifetime's pursuit of social justice and equity for Murray. She challenged the UNC-CH's segregationist policies, the first of many important campaigns for civil rights, and began a letter writing campaign against UNC-CH. This campaign also marked the beginning of a lasting friendship with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

Even in her death, Murray's legacy has continued. In 1987, her autobiography was published. By 2012, she had become a recognized saint. Since 1990, Orange County has awarded residents in her honor and, in 2007, her vibrant life has been immortalized in murals throughout Durham.

Most recently, Patricia Bell-Scott published the book, "The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice," about their enduring friendship. The book was released on Feb. 2, 2016.

Thanks to this book, Murray's quiet legacy will be brought to the nation through film. Davis said filmmakers have contacted Murray's family about the rights to make a movie.

The Oscar Connection

As Murray's story prepares for the silver screen, members of the Commission talked about the Pauli Murray Award and its connection to the Academy Awards.

In 1990, the Orange County Human Relations Commission passed a resolution to create the Pauli Murray Human Rights Award.

According to a letter from Ponder, the award was created to "recognize citizens who serve to promote understanding, tolerance and the celebration of human diversity."

Twenty-six years and 55 awards later, Orange County continues to recognize residents who continue to live out Murray's legacy.

But the 26th award ceremony took an ironic turn as Ponder and Earl McKee, chair of the Orange County Board of County Commissioners, revealed the

origins of the Pauli Murray Award.

McKee said that the Pauli Murray Human Relations Award was actually inspired by the Academy Awards.

"In a conversation, the Human Relations members discussed how the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science came up with the Academy Awards to market the film and movie industry," he said. "The HRC members suggested they follow that same model, but one for social justice."

The commission decided that the social justice award would be given Pauli Murray's honor. The first Pauli Murray awards were given to Rev. Tim Kimrey, Ralph Pendergraph and Louise Echols.

But this year's Pauli Murray Award ceremony falls during an interesting time for the Academy.

For the second year in a row, the Academy has not nominated any actors of color for the top four categories.

This lack of diversity sparked boycotts of the Oscar Awards Ceremony and public reaction, including the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite.

Despite being inspired by the Academy, the Human Relations Commission said they will continue to honor the diversity that exists in Orange County.

"Today, we will see how actors and directors will respond to less than diverse Oscar awards," McKee said. "At the same time, we will be honoring our local citizens for their work to foster a community that is not only diverse, but where our diverse community members have equal access to opportunities.

"Now, how is that for irony?"

Check Out These Websites:

Human Realtions Commission
http://www.orangecountync.gov/departments/hhrcd/human_relations_commission.php

Pauli Murray Project
<http://paulimurrayproject.org/pauli-murray/biography/>

#OscarsSoWhite
<https://twitter.com/hashtag/oscarssowhite>

National Organization for Women
<http://now.org>

