

Activism

Description

Activism is defined by Merriam-Webster as a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue. The first known use of the word was in 1915, but people have been standing up for others and their beliefs far predate this by centuries. Tennessee was the scene for many historical movements, such as the civil rights movement and the women's suffrage movement. Tennessee was the location for many historical events such as the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr as well as it was the 36th state to pass the 19th amendment, giving women the right to vote, which gave the bill the majority vote that allowed it to pass and become a federal law eight days later. Tennessee also saw protest like the sanitation strike in Memphis and the sit-ins in Nashville. These movements and events not only changed the history of our nation, but also gave us key figures that helped push them and to inspire future generations to continue to change our world for the better. Some of those key female figures are featured here along with the issues they fought for. As seen above the definition for activism is a broad one, not limiting activism to certain types of actions or certain types of issues, and this broad definition becomes especially clear when the iconic women featured in this section are compared. These women come from difference social and racial backgrounds as well as are from different generations and each have a different issue they fight for. Equality is the common thread for these women and this equality can be broken down into two very broad categories, racial and gender equality.

Racial equality, particularly the civil rights movement, is the most common activist movement related to Tennessee, and this is also true for many of the notable women activist seen in this section. In 1931, the first Cotton Carnival was held in Memphis. The Cotton Carnival was a predominantly white event, with blacks only being seen in the roles of workers. This inequality is what gave the Venson's the drive to start the Cotton Marker's Jubilee. In 1984 interview Ethel Venson talks about taking her young nephew to one of the Cotton Carnival parades where they had the black men pulling the floats like horses and how this affected her nephew and this is what pushed her and her husband to start the Cotton Marker's Jubilee in 1935. Venson also talks of the financial and racial struggles they went through to get the jubilee start, and the positive effects that have come from the jubilee since it started.

The 1960s brought the sanitation strikes and Martin Luther King, Jr to Memphis, but during this time King was not the only fighter for a sanitation cause. Cornelia Crenshaw, who was an active participant in the strike also protested the sanitation fee that was being charged at the time. Crenshaw, a manager at the Dixie homes public housing complex, protested this fee by refusing to pay it which resulted in her being without utilities for years. She held sleep-ins at Memphis Light, Gas and Water and was an active participant in city council meetings (Handcock). Crenshaw was arrested on many occasions. When she was arrested in 1980, Crenshaw stated she wanted to be arrested since she knew that would get featured in the newspaper and bring more awareness to this cause since the summer before her arrest in 1980 Crenshaw had lost two church members to the heat (The Commercial Appeal). At the time many of the citizens of Memphis were poor and could barely afford their utility expenses before the fee was added.

During this time Crenshaw was not the only lady standing up for civil rights. Maxine Smith was another important figure of this time. Smith held positions such as the executive secretary of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP and was a member of the school board. Busing was an issue Smith often spoke out against. Busing was the practice of transporting kids to schools away from where they live so that all school would have an equal mixture of students from different racial backgrounds. This is what pushed her to run for election as a school board member and also gave her a position for her views to be heard, and have them actual help (Gilliam). Smith, like Crenshaw, spoke out for those that were less fortunate. During the 1980s, Smith with support of the NAACP spoke out against a luxury housing on Front Street in Memphis development project. Smith opposed this project because she believed the city should be using the money to help the less fortunate and not on building expensive housing that was not needed (McCollough). Not far from where this housing project was planned for at this time, now stands the National Civil Rights Museum. For the past 27 years, Jacqueline Smith has manned her one woman protest against the museum. Jacqueline Smith, who is not related to Maxine Smith and was the last resident of the Lorraine Motel before it was converted into part of the museum, reflects Maxine Smith's view of the area. She states the museum, motel and surrounding area (which is populated mostly with luxury apartments, restaurants, and bars) should be used to help the poor and homeless of Memphis.

Gender equality is an issue that does not get as much coverage or recognition when the history of Tennessee is viewed, but as previously states Tennessee was the state that pushed the 19th amendment to being passed as law. Many of the women that were part of the suffrage movement were also part of the civil rights movement and vice versa. Elizabeth Meriweather, was a Memphis resident that was an active participant in the suffrage movement. Meriweather published many books on the subject of women's rights and she also write letters to important political men trying to get their support for the movement so that the laws for gender equality could be passed. One particular figure that she wrote to trying to get his vote for the amendment was John H. Reagan, who was a politician that held the office of Postmaster General, and his response is featured in this section.

Women like Meriweather, Venson, Crenshaw and Smith are who inspire future generations to stand up for their beliefs and against injustices. This is seen in how Maxine Smith's views of the 1980s inspired Jacqueline Smith's today. August 26th, 1977 saw the 57th anniversary of the 19th amendment being passed, one this day seven women activist important to Tennessee are interviewed about their views of this day which has come to be known as Women's Equality Day. These women state that this day is not just for women, but should be a day to celebrate equality for both men and women. The most important theme that should be taken from this interview article is that we have come a long way, but we still have so much father to go as a nation and as a world. Women like the ones featured here should be honored and studied so that they can inspire others and create new generations of activists.

Further Reading

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