

# Leona Ford Washington Preserved Black History

By Marisha Hicks and Andreina Vega

**L**eona Ford Washington, an African American woman born and raised in El Paso, said she was taught to “make a contribution to the place where you live. If there is anything you can do better, you should.” Through her activism and civic involvement, Washington created a strong community for African Americans in El Paso.

Leona Ford was born in 1928. She had a twin sister named Leander and two older brothers, Eugene Jr. and Roland. She and her sister were the second set of black twins born in the city. The African American population in El Paso at the time of her birth was estimated to be only 1.5 percent of the population. Her parents both came from Mississippi. Her father, Eugene Ford, came to El Paso in 1915 and worked for the Southern Pacific as a blacksmith’s assistant. Her mother, Lollie Marie Wells, came to El Paso for her health with an Army family and married Ford in 1922. Their four children were delivered at home by Dr. L. A. Nixon, who himself worked for equality for blacks.

When Leona was four, the Fords moved to the Second Ward, better known as *El Segundo Barrio*, a well known Mexican American community today. The Washingtons were very close friends with their Mexican American neighbors. Washington said, “There were some whites in the neighborhood, but eventually they would move out when a lot of blacks moved in.”

At the time Washington was growing up, black El Pasoans were denied a political voice and were forced to suffer segregation. Charlotte Ivy, a contributor to *Password*, the journal of the El Paso County Historical Society, explained that Jim Crow laws created separate drinking fountains, restrooms and waiting areas in train stations for African Americans. Blacks were also forced to sit in separate train cars because of Jim Crow laws, a series of laws in the United States that made segregation legal between the 1870s and 1960s. Ivy said such laws “meant that black El Pasoans were not allowed to enter the socio-political-cultural mainstream of the city.”

El Paso became the literal station where things changed for blacks traveling on trains. Gerald Horne, Professor of History and African American studies at the University of Houston, wrote in his book *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920*, “El Paso was the symbolic and actual dividing line on Jim Crow cars going west or north. Immediately after leaving this town and traveling toward New Mexico, for example, a Negro did not have to endure Jim Crow, while departing in other directions Jim Crow reigned – except, of course, going south toward Mexico.”

Trains and stations were not the only places where segregation was practiced. Schools were also a major area where segregation was common. Washington attended Douglass School, originally named and founded in 1883 as Franklin School. The school, which educated students in grades one through

twelve, was renamed in 1889 for Frederick Douglass, the former slave who became an abolitionist. Ivy wrote that students used hand-me-down uniforms and textbooks which white schools had discarded. Salaries for African American teachers were also lower than for their white counterparts.

Ivy wrote that according to Bruce Mathis, who also attended Douglass: “When black children walked to school with their friends, they knew there was a difference between them and their neighbors.

was made easier for young Leona than for other students since her father worked for the railroad and she had a pass to ride the train.

Because of her race, Washington was not allowed to begin her teaching career in El Paso except at the only black school in town, Douglass. It did not matter that she had not one but two college degrees at a time when most women, of any race, were lucky to graduate from high school. Because Douglass did not have a teaching position available in 1950, she accepted a job in Las Cruces, NM, some 40 miles west of El Paso, where schools were not segregated. Two years later, a position at Douglass opened up and she was able to teach in El Paso.

El Paso’s ethnic diversity helped to ease discrimination. Charlotte Ivy wrote that the segregation laws of Texas were commonly ignored in El Paso, not only by citizens but by city officials as well. Segregated libraries allowed blacks to check out books. In one instance, Lula Mae Traylor, who went to a drugstore fountain to order ice cream to take out, was seated and given a menu instead. So taken back, she ordered and ate, reporting that the incident caused no trouble.

However, in her interview with Ivy, Washington recalled that African Americans in El Paso were forced to sit in the back section of street cars and had to sit in the balcony of movie theaters unless they went to the Mexican theaters. Although El Paso practiced segregation in many areas, there were other places that African Americans could go to escape this. Most would go just across the border to Juárez, Mexico, for entertainment where blacks were welcome, thus helping to enhance the economy there.

In 1954, Texas Western College (now UTEP) became the first college in Texas to admit black students. In 1955, the El Paso Independent School District was the first major school district in Texas to desegregate. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had established a local chapter in 1910. Leona Washington was a member and secretary of the NAACP at a pivotal time in El Paso history. In an interview with Ivy, Washington stated that many Mexican American and white

El Pasoans were “sensitive” to and “supportive” of desegregation.

In an interview with Dailey and Navarro, Washington recalled her parents instilling in her the values of right and wrong, values that were reinforced by the church. For more than 60 years, Washington was a member of the Second Baptist Church, established in 1884. Washington’s family lived about five blocks from their church and she, her siblings and mother did janitorial work there, in addition to attending services.

Washington believed the church holds an important purpose for women. She said that “the role of women is to instill good principles and



Teaching young people and recording the history of El Paso’s African American community gave Leona Ford Washington great pleasure. (Photo courtesy of the McCall Neighborhood Center)

They passed one segregated school after another, dropping off playmates along the way. But after school they all met to share the fun and secrets of the neighborhood.” Maceo C. Dailey, Jr. and Kristine Navarro in their book on African American women in El Paso reported that Douglass “provided a meeting place for community discussion, programming, and development in education and economics.”

After graduating from Douglass, Leona Washington was forced to leave El Paso to attend college because the Texas School of Mines and Metallurgy (now UTEP), did not admit African Americans. Instead, she received both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from what is now Prairie View A & M University near Houston, the only college for black students in Texas at the time. Transportation

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morals in the lives of the people they touch, whether they are African American or not. They should become more involved in community.” She sang in



**The Missouri Community Center was renamed to honor Leona Ford Washington.**  
(Photo by Andreina Vega)

the choir at Second Baptist and served as organist, Christian Education Board member, public relations chairperson and director of Baptist Training Union.

Bruce Mathis said to Ivy that in the memories of those reared in El Paso, the church was central to their lives. Alwyn Barr, professor of history at Texas Tech University, agreed that black churches “were more than religious organizations. They became an important part of everyday life to blacks, both men and women.”

Washington worked as a teacher for 39 years. She believed in exposing underprivileged youth to activities that would let them see another side of life other than what they were restricted to. She insisted that everyone should “get an education so you can be of service to the community.” Washington tried to motivate her students by telling them they had “the same things any great person had: two eyes, two ears and a mind.” However, she also expected her

students to “have certain standards and morals and principles.”

Another way Washington helped El Paso youth was to work as a coordinator for the Miss Black El Paso Scholarship Pageant for about 23 years. Her daughter, Valerie Northington-Geason, emphasized that her mother “was very aware and wanted to keep the African American population here active ... and involved in the community as a whole.” Northington-Geason commented that Washington “saw an opportunity to get our young ladies involved in a positive light.”

Washington also used her writing and musical skills for the community. From the 1950s through the 1980s, she wrote and edited *The Southwest Torch Newspaper*, begun in 1937 because local newspapers were not that interested in El Paso’s black population. The paper changed its name to *The Good Neighbor Interpreter* and covered the activities of the African American community. In the 1970s, she composed the words and music to El Paso’s official song, “City of El Paso.” Washington wrote two other original compositions about El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Local music legend Ross Capshaw helped her with the musical arrangements for these songs.

In 1983, Leona Washington began her quest to establish a black cultural center. In 1984, she rented the Marshall McCall home, which was for sale, and established the McCall Neighborhood Center. The building itself is a part of African American history. It is the former house of Olalee McCall, a teacher at Douglass who became principal in 1937, and Marshall McCall, El Paso’s first black mail carrier. To this day

it serves as an African American heritage and cultural center.

The McCall Center features pictures, books, exhibits and information detailing African American history in El Paso. The center hosts a senior lunch program and promotes events to celebrate important African American holidays such as Juneteenth and Kwanza. Washington made the center the focal point for the black community. Donald Williams, lawyer and McCall Center board member, pointed out in a 2010 *El Paso Times* article that El Paso does not “have a black neighborhood. ... This center is a historical institution that serves as the center of black El Paso.”

In 1991, Leona Washington donated dozens of boxes of photographs and other papers documenting African American history in El Paso to the Special Collections Department of the UTEP Library. One librarian said, “It is the largest collection of its kind we’ve received in recent years. Until now our collection has not had any information on the black community of El Paso.” Washington told Dailey and Navarro, “African Americans need to be proud of the contributions our forefathers have made. ... They need to know their history and build on it.”

Washington received recognition for her work in the African American community. In 1984, she was inducted into the El Paso County Democratic Hall of Fame, and in 1991, the El Paso Commission for Women’s Hall of Fame honored her. In the late 1990s, she was awarded the city’s highest honor, the Conquistador Award, given to those who have contributed significantly to El Paso. In 2001, the El Paso Parks and Recreation Department renamed the Missouri Community Center at 3400 E. Missouri Ave. for Washington. It is now the Leona Ford Washington Community Center.

Considered the “unofficial historian of the African American community,” Leona Washington died August 5, 2007, at age 79. Wayne Thornton, writing in the *El Paso Times* shortly after her death, called her a “community treasure.” He said that Washington “was a visionary and a true believer and extraordinarily gifted in finding that special spark for life in others.” In 2007, she posthumously received the Myrna Deckert Lifetime Achievement Award from the YWCA for her contributions to the community. Her selfless activism left an indelible mark on the African American community and has enriched El Paso’s history. ♪

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years at Heuser’s Ballet Centre. She made the costumes for two ballets of the San Francisco company with the second skill. Heuser herself designed many costumes for her own productions and those of various operas.

Other students of Heuser’s have gone on to become exceptional dancers and instructors. Renee Segapeli danced professionally for Ballet El Paso for many years, after becoming its youngest apprentice at age 11 and winning several national competitions. In 1988, she and her husband Peter Fairweather, a dancer with Britain’s Royal Ballet, acquired the Cranford School of Ballet in England, changing its name to Southwest Ballet Arts. She and her husband, a former teacher at Ballet El Paso and UTEP, continue to run the school successfully.

Andree Harper, another of Heuser’s star pupils, teaches ballet at UTEP and privately at Champion Studio. In 1974, she was the first to receive a degree in ballet from UTEP. Her first view of Heuser was that she held “a big stick in her hand.” When she got to know her teacher, however, Harper realized that Heuser was tiny and [would] “quietly bat her eyelashes.” In a 2008 UTEP *Prospector* article, Harper called Heuser a “classical icon” and said she did “great, great things for the ballet program.”

Heuser’s dedication to her craft and her students did not come without a price. Her first marriage ended in divorce. After the birth of her second son, Christian, her second marriage also ended in divorce, but personal struggles were not the only battles to be fought.

In 1997, Ballet El Paso folded due to financial trouble. “That really affected me,” Heuser told Maribel Villalva of the *Times* on Dec. 2, 2006. “After that I even broke my arm [while dancing].”

In a personal interview with EPCC student, Iriana Fogle, who also was Heuser’s student, Heuser said that although there are struggles, all will be well in the end. “There is a God of Theatre, and as long as you worship him, you will be taken care of.”

In 2006, Heuser directed her last “Nutcracker,” the highlight of the holiday season for generations of El Pasoans. She directed the “Nutcracker” ballet for 45 years. Heuser’s last performances of the Christmas favorite were held at the Plaza Theater in downtown El Paso.

Ingeborg Heuser retired from UTEP in 2007, a few years after UTEP quit offering a ballet major. The ballet program was moved to the Theater Department from the Music Department, where it had been for decades, and placed under the aegis of UTEP’s Dinner Theater.

Retirement did not mean Heuser stopped teaching, however. She still teaches ballet at The El Paso Conservatory of Dance, established by a member of Heuser’s ballet company, Marta Katz.

Over her career, Heuser has received numerous awards from her adopted city, including the “Star of the Mountain” Lifetime Achievement Award from the City Council in 2005 and the YWCA’s REACH Award in 2006. The El Paso Association for the Performing Arts honored her with their Image Award, and Heuser was inducted into the El Paso Women’s Commission Hall of Fame in 2009.

For almost half a century, Heuser has entertained El Pasoans at the theater with her beautiful stage sets, elaborately made costumes and exquisite choreography. Through her dedication and passion, thousands of El Pasoans have been caught up in fanciful stories told with music and dance. Although she had to overcome struggles and make sacrifices, Heuser’s love for ballet and sharing that with El Paso has been paramount because, as she told the *Times*, “When you’re caught in the dance, you can’t get away.” ♪