

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Opal Lee

(October 7, 1926 -)

"Grandmother of Juneteenth"



Opal Lee was born in Marshall, Texas on October 7, 1926. She was the oldest of three children born to Mattie and Otis Flake. When Opal was ten years old, her father left town to find work while her mother moved the family to Fort Worth. When her father heard the family was in Fort Worth, he joined them. Opal's mother fell on a city bus and was awarded a settlement, which the family used to purchase a home at 940 East Annie Street on the south side of Fort Worth in June 1939. They were the first Black family in the neighborhood, prompting an angry mob of 500 white residents to burn down their home on, of all dates, June 19, 1939.

Opal graduated from I.M. Terrell High School (Fort Worth's only black high school), in 1943, at the age of 16. She graduated from Wiley College with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and later received her Master's Degree in Counseling and Guidance at North State University. She got married, had four children, and divorced after five years of marriage. She worked as an educator in Fort Worth, Texas for fifteen years and another nine at a home school counselor before retiring in 1977. She is a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority.

After retirement, Opal began a new career working at a community food bank in the Jax beer-distributing building. When the building burned down, she and other community workers moved into a warehouse where initially the rent was \$4,000 a month. After a year, however, the owner donated the building after he recognized the importance of the food bank to the community. For the past five decades, the community food bank has fed an average of 500 families each week. Opal lives near the warehouse and owns a thirteen-acre farm, growing food for the food bank.

Opal along with twenty other charter members founded the Tarrant County Black Historical and Genealogical Society, in April 1977. Since its founding, the society organized local annual Juneteenth celebrations. Each year thousands gathered at Sycamore Park to commemorate the official end of slavery in Texas.

In 2016, at 90 years old, Opal began a campaign to make Juneteenth a national holiday. In 2017, she began "Walk Across America" walking symbolic distances of 2.5 miles each time to symbolize the 2.5 years that it took for enslaved people in Texas to learn they were freed. She walked from her home state of Texas to Washington, D.C. She walked again in the Summer of 2019 and again in 2020. With her efforts, Opal delivered a petition with over 1.6 million signatures to Washington, D.C.

On June 17, 2021, Opal Lee stood next to President Joe Biden as he signed Senate Bill S. 475, making Juneteenth the eleventh federal holiday. With President Biden's signature, Juneteenth became the first federal holiday created by Congress since 1983, when lawmakers established Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Opal Lee continued working in the Fort Worth Community with the local food bank but has since retired.

In 2022, Opal Lee was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize "in recognition of her work to establish Juneteenth as a national holiday and bring awareness to the contributions and struggles of African Americans in the United States, as well as her mission to create a more equitable society for humanity."

