

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Barbara Hillary

(June 12, 1931 – November 23, 2019)

“First Black Woman Explorer to Reach the North and South Pole”



Barbara Hillary was born June 12, 1931 in Manhattan, New York. Barbara's father died when she was just two years old and his death created a financial hardship for her mother. Although her mother worked long hours cleaning homes, she always made time to read to Barbara and emphasized the importance of education. Barbara attended New School, a private research university where she studied Gerontology - the study of social, cultural, psychological and biological aspects of aging. Barbara earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree. She used her education in Gerontology to establish a career in nursing, focusing on staff training on aging and care service systems in nursing homes and facilities.

In her mid 20's, Barbara was diagnosed with breast cancer. At the age of 66, she was diagnosed with lung cancer which required surgery to remove part of her lung. In spite of her health challenges, Barbara spent 55 years working in the nursing field before retiring.

After retirement, Barbara was ready for her next adventure - Arctic traveling. She photographed polar bears in Manitoba, a province of Canada, and went dog sledding in Quebec. When she heard that no black woman had ever been to the North Pole - she knew exactly what she would do next - be the first.

Barbara faced two major challenges in her quest to reach the North Pole - finances and health. Although part of her lung had been removed, Barbara trained extensively - joining a gym, lifting weights, walking miles on a treadmill and hiking while pulling weighted sleds, just to build up her strength and lung capacity. She would need to be in top physical and mental shape to cross-country ski for eight to ten hours a day to make it to the North Pole. She also needed funding.

At that time, an expedition to the North Pole cost around \$20,000 for equipment and transportation. Barbara sent letters requesting donations to sponsors and eventually collected \$25,000 for her historic trip. In the spring of 2007, she signed on for an expedition with Eagles Cry Adventures and was taken by helicopter to a Norwegian base camp about 30 miles from the North Pole.

She hiked with the team, carrying the heavy equipment on her back, trekking over the frozen, snow-covered ground. On April 23, 2007, at the age of 76, Barbara Hillary became the first black woman to reach the North Pole. She was also one of the oldest to ever make the journey. Overwhelmed with excitement, Barbara removed her extreme cold-weather gloves and immediately suffered frostbite on her fingers.

Four years later, she would set another record, on the other side of the world. On January 6, 2011, Barbara Hillary, age 79, became the first black woman to reach the South Pole.

At age 87, Barbara travelled to Outer Mongolia to spend time with nomadic groups, studying the effects of climate change on their way of life. Her experiences in polar climates transformed Barbara into an environmental activist. She delivered inspirational speeches to colleges and organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) on the subject of the effects of climate change.

Although her next adventure was planned, Barbara's health began to decline rapidly. On November 23, 2019, Barbara Hillary died. She was 88 years old. In 2020, Barbara Hillary was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

