

Esther Swirk Brown

Civil Rights Activist
1917-1970

by Barbara Magerl

Why would a comfortable white, suburban Jewish housewife concern herself with black students' schools? Because she had a keen sense of brotherhood and social justice.

Esther Swirk Brown was born in Kansas City and attended Paseo High School, the University of Chicago, and Northwestern University. After her marriage in 1943 she filled the role of a typical Johnson County suburbanite—until she learned of the terrible conditions for black students not far from her home.

The local school board had drawn up new boundaries in the South Park area so that another all-white school could be built. Black students had been gerrymandered out of the new school attendance area and were left with a very deteriorated, dangerous building, only two teachers, and outdoor plumbing!

Brown knew this violated an 1896 court ruling that required “separate but equal” facilities. She mounted a legal team to file the *Webb vs. Kansas* case named for the father of a South Park black student. Thurgood Marshall, a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and later a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, assisted.

In 1949 *Webb v. Kansas* was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court and blacks entered South Park School; federal school integration was not mandated until 1954.

Keenly aware of discrimination, Brown was active in many Jewish organizations, but she went beyond her own ethnic circle. She organized the Panel of American Women, speakers of various races and religions, that became a national movement with 1,400 participants. Among her many awards was the 1969 Brotherhood Award from the Kansas City Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.



Esther Swirk Brown died in 1976. A plaque in a small park at 51st and England Street in Merriam, Kansas, honors the civil rights crusader.

Sources

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