

# Virnetta Anderson

By Timi Fabiyi

In the annals of history are figures whose mere mention evokes a sense of awe and reverence. Virnetta Anderson, perhaps not as widely known as some, was a revolutionary figure in Calgary. She left an indelible mark on history through her unwavering commitment to the Calgary City Council. As the curtains of time draw back to reveal her story, one finds not just a narrative of personal triumph but a beacon of inspiration for individuals seeking to enact positive change and make a difference in their community. Amidst the bustling city of Calgary, Anderson planted seeds of change that would flourish into a legacy of resilience, courage, and unwavering dedication. It is within the contours of her journey that one discovers the true essence of a pioneer, a catalyst for transformation, and a timeless symbol of hope.

Virnetta Anderson, born in 1920 in the city of Monticello, Arkansas, was a woman of remarkable resilience. In 1952, she and her husband, Ezzrett Anderson, moved to Calgary, where she embarked on a journey of determination. Anderson's unwavering faith, regular church attendance, and active roles with the United Church were a testament to her resilience. She was the first black person ever elected to the City Council in 1974, serving as Alderman for the next three years. She sought out any opportunity for change, volunteering in several organizations around her community, including United Way, Calgary Tourist and Convention Association, and the Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts, to name a few.

Virnetta's relentless pursuit of improvement knew no bounds as she fearlessly ventured outside of the confines of just her community. She wanted to do more. In 1988, she was appointed to the Citizen Advisory Committee by then-mayor Ralph Klein. She represented herself for the women of Calgary, offering a rare female point of view. At this time, she tackled transportation, indigenous employment opportunities, affordable housing, the needs of youth, and other issues regarding the quality of life for citizens. Virnetta had an aptitude for bringing people together, and her confidence and willingness to champion the underrepresented served as an inspiration to fellow Calgarians, even now, to do the same. Regardless of race, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic, Virnetta stayed true to herself and the people that she serves, speaking these words; "I am not just for women's rights, I am not just for Black rights, I am for human rights." She tirelessly advocated for progress and reform in every aspect of her life, contributing to the future eradication of social constraints and barriers in Alberta. Today, Calgarians continue honouring and remembering her, renaming the Calgary Power Reception Hall to The Virnetta Anderson Hall. This Hall is a constant reminder of her legacy for this city.

One of Virnetta's most memorable accomplishments would have to be the Paul Harris Fellow Award, which was presented to her by Calgary's Rotary Cup. This award represents those who donate money to The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International. With her donations, Virnetta Anderson contributed to vocational training centres for teachers in South Africa, water filters, toilets, hygiene training to prevent diseases in India, peace-building seminars in Uganda, and many other foundations and fundraisers worldwide. Virnetta Anderson's generosity touched hearts and saved the lives of many citizens outside of Alberta.

Virnetta Anderson's determination, perseverance and hard work have had a profound impact on me. As a young black woman, I have faced issues with racism, discrimination and other inequalities around my community because of the way I look. Virnetta Anderson faced the same problems but kept them from defining her or stopping her from doing well in Calgary. Witnessing her unwavering commitment to improving her community for citizens reminds me that no challenge is impossible and has instilled a profound sense of responsibility to stand up for what is right. In the past year, I have grown academically, exceeded expectations, passed all my classes with flying colours, and even taken home with me the Rotary Cup award for the most improved student. I dedicate my time to volunteering in multiple capacities and organizations around Calgary, including the Calgary Food Bank, Robotics Competitions, Be The Change, Hope Mission, Sports Scorekeeping, Anti-Racism Task Force, and other clubs and extracurriculars. My teachers noticed my diligence, and in June of 2023 and 2022, I received the Service Award in my school. I will continue to carry my achievements pridefully as I journey through Centennial High School's Advanced Placement program, meeting fellow students who share my passion for community service and equality and mentors who will provide me with support and guidance. Lastly, my favourite commitment is serving on my church's grade school team and working with children from preschool to grade 4. Seeing them connect with Christ and break out of their comfort zone during their weekly church service due to my actions is a poignant reminder that my work is merely unfolding.

After studying Virnetta Anderson's life and accomplishments, I gleaned valuable insights into the importance of bravery and hard work. Every aspect of life comes with obstacles that

hinder the achievement of success. Instead of allowing external forces to control our actions, one can use them as fuel to propel oneself toward goals and aspirations. Without Virnetta's conduct towards human rights, I couldn't pursue my dreams with the same determination and conviction. Without her, I, and many others, wouldn't be able to call themselves a champion. My teachers, family and peers wouldn't have recognized me for my community service. My grades and perseverance wouldn't have gotten me closer to where I am now.

To conclude, Virnetta was and is a powerful and heroic figure in not just the city of Calgary but the whole of Canada. Her works taught us to appreciate the community we reside in and to do everything in our power to make it better for the people who come after us. Her contributions to the Citizen Advisory Committee, her advocacy for human rights, and her dedication to improving the quality of life for all citizens have left an indelible mark on the city of Calgary. Today, her legacy lives on in the hearts and minds of Calgarians, and her name is synonymous with courage, resilience, and unwavering dedication. We may not all be able to do what Virnetta Anderson did, but even a little bit of tenacity and a touch of courage is enough to ignite Alberta's potential.

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