



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY





Vel Phillips

You graduated from college, you have a good job, and you are looking for your first apartment. It's an exciting time! But when you meet the landlord, they turn you away because of the color of your skin. Would you let racists tell you where and how to live? Or would you fight for change like Vel Phillips did?

Velvlea Rodgers was born in Milwaukee on February 18, 1924. Vel was a great student and earned a scholarship to attend Howard University in Washington, DC. She graduated from college in 1946. In 1947, she met and married Dale Phillips. Together, they went to law school. Vel graduated from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Law School in 1951. She and Dale moved to Milwaukee to start a business and raise a family.

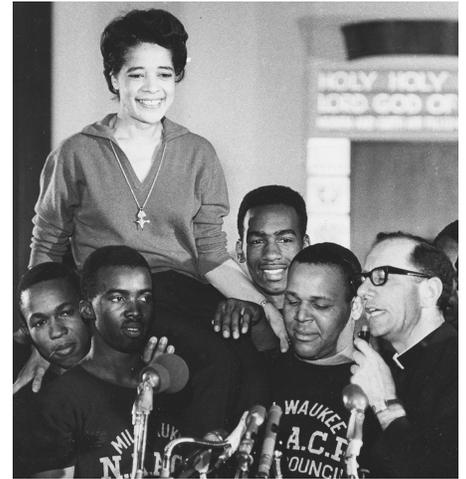
Vel and Dale both experienced systemic racism in Milwaukee. White people made it very hard to find work or places to live outside of a small area in Milwaukee called the Inner Core. The Inner Core was a neighborhood on the city's north side. Most of its residents were African Americans. The leaders of Milwaukee refused to pay for repairs to the roads and schools within the Inner Core. Homes were falling apart. Schools were neglected. There weren't many jobs. White landlords would not rent to Black people outside of the Inner Core. Black families could not buy homes in other parts of the city. Something had to be done.

Vel wanted to make people's lives better, so she decided to run for office. She knew it wasn't fair that people could not live, work, and go to school where they wanted because of the color of their skin. She believed that everyone should "Live where you want to live." Vel ran for a seat on the school board. She won the primary, but she lost the election. It was the first time an African American woman had won a primary! She didn't stop there. In 1956, Vel won a seat on the Milwaukee City Council. Vel became "Madam Alderman" and went to work for the people of Milwaukee.

Vel proposed her Fair Housing Law in 1962. The law would make it illegal to discriminate against people because of the color of their skin. The law was voted down six years in a row. Activists began protesting against the unfair treatment of African Americans.

Vel participated in nonviolent protests, but she was eventually arrested at a rally. Vel and Father James Groppi led protestors for two hundred nights of marching. Night after night, they marched from the Inner Core and across the 16th Street Bridge. Every night their march ended in South Milwaukee. Angry white men and women lined the streets. They swore at the marchers and threw rocks and bottles at them. Riots broke out in Milwaukee in July of 1967, and four people were killed. Tensions rose between the marchers and the police. The National Guard was called in. Finally, in 1968, the Fair Housing Law that Vel had written was approved by the city council. The marchers had won!

Vel Phillips's career included many "firsts." She was the first African American woman to graduate from UW-Madison's law school. She was the first to win a seat on Milwaukee's City Council. She was the first to become Secretary of State of Wisconsin. She was the first to become a judge. Even though she passed away in 2018, the Vel Phillips Foundation still works to help people achieve their dreams.



Vel Phillips being carried on the shoulders of Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council members. On the right is Father James Groppi.

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Learn more about Vel Phillips and Father James Groppi in the Badger Biographies series book *Father Groppi: Marching for Civil Rights* from the Wisconsin Historical Society Press.