

A Real/Not Reel/Black Superhero: Frances Mary Albrier (1898-1987) was born in Mount Vernon, New York. When she was just three, her mother died and Frances Mary was taken to Tuskegee, Alabama, to be raised by her grandmother, a midwife who had been born a slave. After attending high school at Tuskegee Institute, Albrier earned a BA from Howard University in 1920 then moved to Berkeley, California where she attended the University of California-Berkeley, and completed two years of nurses' training to pursue a nursing career.

The white nursing community, however, was not hiring black nurses. Thus, Albrier became involved with the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as a nurse for the Black Cross Nurses Corps. The Black Cross was based on the services of the Red Cross in World War I. It trained medical professionals of African descent to provide health services and hygiene education to underserved black members of the community unable to find health employment or adequate health care as was provided to white members of the community.



Albrier did find work as a Pullman car maid with the Pullman Company and became active in the Porter's Union, most notably the political and women's auxiliaries. Her political involvement was based in the reality that blacks were taxpayers without representation in the city government, in its recreational centers, or in the schools of Berkeley. Her mission was to effect racial inclusion for taxpayers of African descent.

During the 1930s she started to openly challenge discrimination and social injustice wherever she found it. It began a formidable sequence of campaigns for her. In 1938 she became the first woman elected to the Alameda County Democratic Central Committee as a committeewoman. She went on to found the East Bay Women's Welfare Club of mothers whose goal was to get black teachers hired in the Berkeley public schools. Albrier accomplished this goal when Ruth Acty was hired after five years of advocacy.

In 1939, Albrier was the first woman of African descent to run for the Berkeley City Council. She didn't win but held prominent positions in the California Democratic Party for several decades hence. Also that year, she initiated a "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work Campaign" and was photographed carrying a sign leading a picketing protest for this cause. By 1940 she had formed the Citizens Employment Council to fight for jobs and fair employment practices for the city's black community.



In wartime 1942, wanting to contribute to the war effort, she found herself facing another racial and gender barrier when she applied for employment at Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond. She had completed a welding course with twice the required hours because, as she commented, “I felt I had to be better because I was a black woman.” She passed the welder’s test impressively, but had her application rejected by the Boilermakers Union because Kaiser had not yet set up an “auxiliary” [union] for Negroes. Albrier threatened a lawsuit. In response, the Richmond union agreed to accept her dues and employ her.

The job for which she fought and won made her the first black woman welder in Kaiser’s shipyards. But the union had transferred her dues from Richmond to an “auxiliary” union in an Oakland shipyard. Albrier was not satisfied.

Backed by support, and with pressure, from the black community, she continued to seek justice with her lawsuit and witnessed success in the 1945 *James v. Marinship* decision that outlawed auxiliaries. Her victory paved the way for thousands of women and black men to secure better paying jobs in the Bay Area’s then booming shipyard industry.

During the 1950s, in an Oakland department store window, she created the first display celebrating National Negro History Week that was started in 1926 by noted historian, scholar, educator, and publisher Carter G. Woodson. The week became a month-long celebration in 1976.

Also in the 1950s, Albrier integrated Berkeley’s League of Women Voters and the Red Cross, where she taught first aid classes to local youth for many years. She also was a prominent member of the National Council of Negro Women and the Citizenship Education Project.

She became a peace and disarmament activist during the 1960s who spoke out against the Vietnam War. She was a pioneer in fighting for the rights of senior citizens and people with disabilities by serving on Berkeley’s Model Cities program, part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty that brought federal dollars to south Berkeley. In 1971 she was a delegate to the White House Conference on Aging.

Numerous awards were bestowed upon her during her lifetime for her service. They include the NAACP's "Fight for Freedom," award, the Tuskegee Alumni Association Award for outstanding civic activities, the Bay Area Democratic Women Achievement Award, the Alpha-Chi-Omega outstanding contribution to community service award, and a long list of others, too long to list here. She also was honored by the City of Berkeley who named the Frances Albrier Community Center in San Pablo Park after her in 1984.

Frances Mary Albrier fought for equality and social justice throughout her entire life. She was a champion of voter rights who worked tirelessly to register new voters during her nearly six decades of community activism while working as a nurse, maid, welder and a union organizer until her death in 1987.

In 1997, the city of Berkeley established their prestigious Berkeley Historical Plaque Project to honor its citizens who have made an exemplary difference for the people of the area. Frances Mary Albrier was so honored with a plaque for her decades of continuous activism, both within and outside the African American community. Truly she was a real, not reel, Black Superhero.



- Sources: <http://berkeleyplaques.org/e-plaque/frances-albrier/>
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