

Women as Girls and School Integration II: Linda Brown was born in Topeka, Kansas on February 20, 1942 to Leola and Oliver Brown. She and her two younger sisters grew up in an ethnically diverse neighborhood of Topeka. She played with children who were Spanish-American, children who were white, children who were American Indian, and black children.

However, when she reached school age, she could not go to school with all her playmates. The white children would attend Sumner elementary a few blocks away to which they could walk. But Sumner was a segregated public school for whites and Linda was black.

Linda was forced to attend Monroe elementary, a segregated public school for blacks some four miles away. She could not walk there directly, but had to cross a busy road, walk through a rail yard and across railroad tracks to board a bus to take her to school despite there being a public school walking distance from her home that would not require her to walk through a rail yard and across railroad tracks to board a bus in order to attend school.



Linda took this perilous walk her first years of elementary school as a 5, 6, 7 year old child. She later recalled “When I first started the walk it was very frightening to me, and then when wintertime came, it was a very cold walk. I remember walking, tears freezing up on my face, because I began to cry.” Often, it was freezing cold on the bus.

She remembered that her father questioned - Why? Why should my child walk for miles when there is a school only a few blocks away? Why should we have to tell our children that they cannot go to the school in their neighborhood because their skin is black? Her mother deeply felt the injustice as many years before, she had to walk to a school bus and be bused some two miles across town to the all-black Monroe elementary school as her daughter now had to do.



In 1950, the Brown family received a registration form from Sumner. Linda was then a third grader who wanted to join her white friends in class. She recalled being just thrilled when she found out she might be able to go to their school.

She remembered the day her father took her to Sumner. She remembered trying to keep up with her dad. Oliver Brown walked with a sense of urgency that day.

In an interview in the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary Linda recalled:

“... walking over to Sumner school with my dad that day and going up the steps of the school and the school looked so big to a smaller child. And I remember going inside and my dad spoke with someone and then he went into the inner office with the principal and they left me out ... to sit outside with the secretary. And while he was in the inner office, I could hear voices and hear his voice raised as the conversation went on. And then he immediately came out of the office, took me by the hand and we walked home from the school. (She remembered she could feel the tension being transferred from his hand to hers.) I just couldn't understand what was happening because I was so sure that I was going to go to school with Mona and Guinevere, Wanda, all my playmates.”

The school had told her father no, Linda could not be enrolled. The registration form the Brown family received was apparently by mistake. Linda remembered her father told her he was going to try his best to do something about it. He felt it was wrong. Sumner's refusal to accept Linda led her father to meet with the NAACP that September 1950.

After four years, on May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court announced its unanimous ruling in *Brown v Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the unanimous decision: “We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place.”

Linda was returning home from school when she heard the news. Upon arriving home she remembered, “There were tears in my father's eyes. Little did he know years ago, when he stepped off the witness stand, he stepped into the pages of history.”

But Linda never got the chance to attend Sumner. By the time the Supreme Court handed down its decision she was in junior high school. Photographers were at her classroom on the first day of school in September 1954 taking photos of her.



Some classmates thought it funny and didn't believe her role in the court case. Reporters followed her; some tracked her grades, which reportedly were never less than “B.”

Her family moved to Springfield, Missouri in 1959 where Linda attended an integrated high school. As a senior in 1961, she first began to realize the significance of the *Brown* decision. In an American history class about segregation and the Supreme Court decisions she thought, “Gee, some day I might be in history books!”

After two years in Missouri Oliver died, and Leola moved the girls back to Topeka. Linda went on to attend Washburn and Kansas State universities. After graduation, she became a teacher with the Head Start early childhood program, a speaker, and an educational consultant. She married and had two children. Throughout her life, she continued to advocate for equal access to education in Kansas.



In 1979, with her own children Charles and Kimberley attending Topeka schools, she became a plaintiff and reopened her Topeka case with the American Civil Liberties Union. Arguing that the district's schools still were not desegregated, she sued the school district. After fourteen years of litigation, it was ruled that the school system was still racially divided. Three new schools were built as part of her advocacy.

In 1988, the Brown family and community leaders in Topeka established the Brown Foundation dedicated to building future leaders through programs that invest in children, and foster equal education opportunity and multicultural understanding. Linda served as a program associate.

In addition to her lifelong advocacy in law and education, Linda Brown's legacy includes the declaration of historic landmark status for both Sumner and Monroe. In 1992, Monroe was declared a National Historic Site.

When asked about her role in the historic case, Linda recalled that when magazines began to do follow-ups on her and her family, she inherited much of the recognition and credit that would have gone to her father who died all too young at age 42. But she added, she was very proud that this happened to her and her family and thought it has helped minorities everywhere.



Linda Brown died at age 76 in her home city of Topeka, Kansas, March 25, 2018. Sherrilyn Ifill, president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, in a statement remarked,



"Linda Brown is one of that special band of heroic young people who, along with her family, courageously fought to end the ultimate symbol of white supremacy – racial segregation in public schools. She stands as an example of how ordinary schoolchildren took center stage in transforming this country."

Sources: <https://brownvboard.org/content/brown-foundation>

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