

Women as Girls and School Integration III: The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa was founded in 1831 and for 121 years the university's tacit "whites only" policy stood unquestioned.

In 1956, at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Autherine Jaunita Lucy would become the first black student to integrate a whites-only school and is the first black student to experience the anger of an organized mob protesting her school attendance. Each of the three days she attended school, she was in significant danger.

Autherine was born to Minnie Hosea and Milton Cornelius Lucy on October 5, 1929, in the small farming community of Shiloh, Alabama. The youngest of their ten children, she grew up on the 110-acre farm her parents owned and maintained. Her father also did blacksmithing, and made baskets and ax handles to supplement their income. All the children helped on the farm picking cotton and harvesting crops. Slight of build, Autherine seemed to lack physical stamina and often lagged behind her siblings. She was shy but her intellectual abilities were evident especially in reading, grammar and spelling.

She graduated high school, earned a two-year teaching degree from Selma University and a B.A. (English) from Miles College. At Miles she met two of the most important people in her life: students Hugh Lawrence Foster, who she would marry, and Pollie Anne Myers who would become her catalyst into the school desegregation movement.

Autherine and Pollie developed a sincere friendship despite their inherent differences. Autherine was shy. Pollie was not. Autherine preferred quiet, book study. Pollie joined the NAACP youth chapter and incorporated activism in her studies.

Following their graduation in 1952, they both aspired to have an advanced teaching degree. Pollie asked Autherine if she wanted to apply to University of Alabama's graduate school. It was the state's premier educational institution, but no black student had ever been admitted. "I thought she was joking at first," Autherine said. But Pollie was serious.

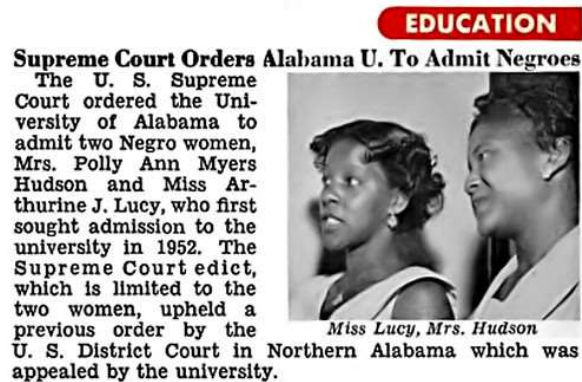
On September 4, 1952, they wrote letters of inquiry to the university. They received application forms and a dormitory registration fee request for five dollars each. On September 10 they were assigned a dormitory per receipt of their fees. On September 13, they received a form letter welcoming them to the university.

On September 19, their applications indicating their ethnicity were received in the admissions office. University officials immediately began to discourage them from pursuing admission. On September 20, when Autherine and Pollie arrived at the admissions office, they were told a mistake had been made, their room deposits were offered in return, and they were turned away. News of the university's actions spread throughout the black community.

On September 24, civil rights attorney Arthur Shores wrote to the university president requesting the students be admitted. The president refused. The desire of Autherine and Pollie to earn an advanced degree became secondary to a greater cause. Shores, with attorney Thurgood Marshall, then head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, took the matter to court: *Lucy and Myers v. University of Alabama*.

On May 17, 1954, two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision became law. It declared separate but equal education in public schools unconstitutional.

On June 29, 1955, thirteen months after *Brown*, U. S. District Court for the Northern District of Alabama Judge Harlan Grooms ruled the University of Alabama could not reject Lucy and Myers on the basis of race. The ruling was later expanded for all people of color seeking admission to UA. The university attempted but could not overturn this ruling.



But the university had previously hired a private investigator to dig into the backgrounds of the two black students seeking information to discredit them. And, shortly after Grooms' ruling it was discovered Pollie, unmarried and pregnant when she applied, violated university moral codes, which made her ineligible for admission. Shy Autherine was faced with proceeding alone - or not proceeding.

And after much prayer she stated, "I decided that it was just something that I must do. That I felt it was my task to do. That I couldn't stop until I felt I had gone as far as I could." The *Lucy* case would be the first test to the *Brown* decision.

Her father, under duress of threats directed at him from his white neighbors, is said to have remarked, "That girl's grown, I raised her to know better. I always treated white people with respect. I always go to the back door." But times were changing.

Also in 1955, also in Alabama, during the court proceedings of *Lucy*, on December 4, Rosa Parks sat on a bus in the morning and in the evening JoAnn Robinson organized the Montgomery bus boycott. It would be the first large-scale U.S. demonstration against segregation. The approximately 40,000 blacks, along with some white bus ridership, boycotted. They walked along the streets every day as empty buses drove past them for what would be 381 days until the U.S. Supreme Court ordered Montgomery, Alabama, to desegregate its bus system. News of the boycott was widely reported around the world.

On February 3, 1956, in an atmosphere where whites were beginning to comprehend they were involved in a social revolution to tear apart their protected apartheid, Autherine Lucy stepped onto the UA campus to attend class following almost four years of court battles after she had been turned away because she was black. She had been duly prepared for this day, most notably that she ignore all insults and hold her head high.



Her first two days were tense but quiet. Most students shunned her, refused to sit in the same row, albeit a few students spoke hushed words of welcome. Having been denied rooming and dining hall privileges, she stayed at her sister's home in Birmingham sixty miles away. Volunteers from the black community drove her to campus and provided her with meals. Her sister and brother-in-law received crank calls and death threats. The black community helped protect their home.

On February 6, her third day of school Monday morning, a mob began to form on campus reportedly to give her "a greeting she would never forget." Crosses burned amid shouts of "Keep 'Bama White!" and "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Autherine's gotta go!" She was able to make her way through to enter the building and attend class.



Her professor's attempt to lecture was interrupted by shouts of "To hell with Autherine!" and "Let's kill her!" Recognizing the severity of the situation, two university officials met Autherine as the class let out and insisted she drive with them to her next class at the Education Library. Rotten eggs were thrown at them as they made their way to the car. The crowd of hundreds grew to thousands. She found refuge in a locked room and prayed: "I asked the Lord to give me the strength—if I must give my life—to give it freely." After several harrowing hours, she was rushed to a patrol car and, lying on the floor in the backseat, was driven from campus.



News of the riot, as of the Montgomery bus boycott, was reported worldwide. It was largely felt that local police had simply let the mob rampage. Lucy was known internationally and her name was a household word. That evening she was suspended from the university for her protection.

Shores and Marshall filed a complaint against UA, claiming it had conspired with the rioters. The university took umbrage at the complaint. It was withdrawn, but not before it had been made public. And, as a result, a hastily contrived technicality was found to permanently expel Lucy — she had defamed the university and its leadership by filing the complaint.

On February 29, three weeks later, Judge Grooms ordered Lucy be reinstated and that the university must take adequate measures to protect her, but he refused to overturn the trustees' decision to expel her. The NAACP deemed further legal action would be to no avail and did not contest. Lucy acquiesced.

In March of 1956, mentally and physically exhausted, she left Alabama feeling defeated. But a letter Marshall wrote reminded her otherwise: “Whatever happens in the future, remember for all concerned, that your contribution has been made toward equal justice for all Americans and that you have done everything in your power to bring this about.”

That year, Pete Seeger wrote and recorded the song “Atherine” as a tribute to a “slip of a girl whose bravery to challenge ignorance and hate made America great.”

Also that year, Lucy married Hugh Lawrence Foster, now a divinity student at Bishop College in Tyler, Texas, and moved to Texas. They had four children, two of whom would one day attend UA. For the next seventeen years, Foster’s ministry moved the family to several Texas towns. Lucy-Foster accepted substitute-teaching jobs wherever she could as her notoriety made securing a teaching position difficult. She spoke at civil rights functions when invited.

On June 11, 1963, Alabama Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway at UA to block entry of two black students. President John F. Kennedy federalized the National Guard and Guard General Henry Graham commanded Wallace to step aside which he did after a few choice words, and students Vivian Malone and James Hood did enter and did desegregate the University of Alabama.



In 1974, the Fosters returned to Alabama where Hugh took a position as pastor of the New Zion Baptist Church in Bessemer, Jefferson County and Autherine obtained a position in the Birmingham School System.

In 1988, thirty-two years after being expelled, Autherine was invited to speak to a history class at UA and was asked, "Did you ever try to re-enroll?" When she replied that she might consider it one day, some faculty members asked the university to overturn her expulsion. In April, her 1956 expulsion was overturned and she was invited to return to the university. The next year, she once again enrolled in a master's degree program at UA. Her daughter Grazia enrolled as an undergraduate at the same time.



On May 9, 1992, Autherine Lucy-Foster earned a master's degree from UA, a degree for which she had first applied forty years earlier. Mother and daughter participated in the commencement exercises together. Lucy was greeted with a standing ovation.

That same year, a \$25,000 endowed scholarship was established in her name and a portrait of her was unveiled in one of the busiest places on campus, the student union. The inscription reads "Her initiative and courage won the right for students of all races to attend the University. She is a sister of the Zeta Phi Beta sorority."

On November 3, 2010, the Autherine Lucy Clock Tower was dedicated in the Malone-Hood Plaza. It displays bronze plaques honoring these three desegregation pioneers. On September 15, 2017, a special marker was erected in Lucy-Foster's honor. Lucy spoke at the ceremony and compared the crowd that welcomed her with the hatred she encountered the first time she entered the university.



On May 4, 2019, Lucy was invited and attended UA's graduation ceremony where she was presented with an honorary doctorate.



AUTHERINE

by Pete Seeger
There's a girl I'm dreaming of, I haven't met her yet
There's a girl I'm dreaming of, I never can forget
She proved herself so faithful, so honest and so true
Her beauty shines so brightly in this night we're passing through.
This girl I'm dreaming of, has a face that's calm and clear
She seems to stand for everything that I hold near and dear
This girl I dream of, I have never seen, her name is Autherine.

I love you Autherine, though I'm a married man
I love you Autherine, for I'm an American
And as I love my country, I love those who make her great
And the bravery of those who challenge ignorance and hate.
I love you Autherine
I'll tell this cockeyed world
How old Jim Crow was rocked back by one slip of a girl
Millions of us know just what I mean
I love you Autherine.

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