

VIOLA DESMOND

As remarkable as Viola Desmond is, the majority of Canadians know very little about her, beyond recent efforts to recognize her as a civil rights leader who challenged racial segregation in Nova Scotia in 1946.

The story I want to tell you is a broader one. The Viola that I want you to meet was also as a pioneering black female entrepreneur.

VIOLA: THE ENTREPRENEUR YOU DO NOT KNOW

Surfacing Viola's entrepreneurial achievements is difficult as there has been considerable focus on her courageous efforts in 1946. To understand Viola as a businesswoman and pioneering entrepreneur, we must begin earlier. Despite significant colour barriers, she fought hard to be educated in an emerging field, despite no formal training and mentorship being offered in Canada. Her business was the first of its kind in Canada. But after establishing her beauty salon, she expanded to include various product lines and a training school – three effective business verticals. She did all of this with “an image of self-confidence, respectability and independence” (Reynolds and Robson, 2018, p. x). Her accomplishments on their own are significant, but if we consider the intersectional barriers of gender, race and class, and remember that she faced considerable difficulties as an African Nova Scotian woman operating in a time of segregation and Jim Crow policy, what she did is simply unmatched and remarkable.

In context, we must also appreciate what her work did for other women in her community who were suffering the same intersectional barriers which were compounded by “traditional post-war contours of life, which offered limited employment opportunities for women” (Reynolds and Robson, 2018, p. 81). It was difficult to pursue the advantages of education which gave some women more independence, but no release from the difficulties of juggling family responsibilities along side a career. Viola stands out not only because she was a modern woman, long before such concepts became popularized in the 1960s alongside the formal Civil Rights Movement, but because she was also so successful as an African Nova Scotian entrepreneur and a rare female business leader and mentor.

Viola's legacy includes her enterprises which expanded beyond the Maritimes and lasted for nearly two decades, but it also includes her many graduates who established professional businesses of their own in Halifax and other parts of Canada (Reynolds and Robson, 2018).

Sadly, after the events of 1946 and the trial, her marriage suffered, and her family became very concerned about the high profile of court case. Ultimately Viola closed her businesses, moving first to Montreal and then to New York in 1955 to pursue other business interests.

OVERVIEW

Viola Desmond (1914-1965): Desmond was a businesswoman and civil libertarian who has become a symbol for civil rights and racial equality in Canada (Reynolds & Robson, 2016). She built an entrepreneurial career in Nova Scotia as a beautician and mentored young black women through her *Desmond School of Beauty Culture* (Bingham, 2013). Desmond saw an emerging market and niche for female entrepreneurs, particularly black women, with the advent of new hair styles and demands for specialty products and upkeep (Bingham, 2013). As a shop owner, she achieved a position of status and authority, which was quite unusual for the times. She followed this up with the development of a beauty school and trained women from New Brunswick, Quebec and Nova Scotia to expand her business, graduating 15 students per year. Even with her success as an entrepreneur and mentor, Desmond is remembered largely for her courage in the face of racial discrimination and has been billed as *Canada's Rosa Parks* (Robson, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2016). In 1946, nine years before Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Alabama, Desmond attended a local movie theatre and took a seat on the main floor seating area reserved for 'whites-only' (Reynolds & Robson, 2016; Bingham, 2013). She was assaulted and dragged from the theatre and later arrested and charged with fraud (Reynolds & Robson, 2016). The incident galvanized community support but segregation was not ended until 1954 (Bingham, 2013). Through the efforts of her sister, Wanda Robson, Desmond's story has become more well known. Desmond was pardoned posthumously in 2010. In 2012, her image appeared on a Canadian postage stamp, and later this year, she will become the first Canadian woman featured on a Canadian banknote.

VIOLA IRENE DAVIS DESMOND AKA VIOLA DESMOND

Biographical Introduction

Viola was one of 15 children born to Gwendolyn Irene (née Johnson) and James Albert Davis in Halifax, Nova Scotia (Robson, 2010). She was born on July 6, 1914 (Nyarko, 2016). She was one of 11 siblings to survive childhood and the youngest of the elder sisters (9 sisters in all) (Robson, 2010).

Viola's grandfather on her maternal side, was a Baptist minister and the family was very religious (Robson, 2010). Viola's mother was an active advocate, who often wrote letters to newspapers when she thought something was "politically, educationally or racially wrong" (Robson, 2010, p. 22). Her father was self-taught and had intermittent work during the depression cutting hair and washing cars (Robson, 2010). It was particularly tough during the depression and Robson (Viola's sister) remarks openly about the family's talent for making "food stretch" and working closely as a family to support the full duties of a busy household (Robson, 2010, p. 34).

While some of Viola's siblings helped with income, others went to school. Viola did both. Viola first trained as a teacher and then earned several professional certificates in cosmetology before opening her first salon in Halifax.

In 1936, Viola married Jack Desmond (Wanda Robson & Viola Desmond Collection 2008-2014). Viola died suddenly and tragically in 1965 at the age of 50, in her New York apartment from a gastrointestinal hemorrhage (Canada's Walk of Fame, 2017).

Education and Training

Viola was a "topnotch" student and studied at Sir Joseph Howe Elementary School and Bloomfield High School (Wanda Robson & Viola Desmond Collection 2008-2014; Robson, 2010, p. 35). Her sister describes her as very particular and needing everything "to be correct" (Robson, 2010, p. 35). In her time, Halifax did not hire black teachers, but as an African Nova Scotian, you could obtain a special certificate which permitted you to teach in the '*black-only*' schools of Hammonds Plains, Preston and Africville (Robson, 2010). Viola obtained her certificate and was teaching by age 16 in Preston (Robson, 2010; Canada's Walk of Fame, 2017).

As a student, Viola was greatly inspired by Madam C.J. Walker¹ (Robson, 2010, p. 36-38). Walker's success, by Robson's account, is what encouraged Viola on her path to entrepreneurship (Robson, 2010). In the 1930s, vocational training facilities were not open to black women and there were no black women working professionally in the field of cosmetology in Halifax. To pursue her dreams, Viola saved her money from teaching and went on to study the trade in Montreal, New York and New Jersey (Robson, 2010; Bank of Canada, 2016).

Building Her Business

After training she returned to Halifax where she started her business in 1937, called *Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture*² (Bank of Canada, 2016). The beauty parlour, specifically devoted to serving black women "became a gathering place for women in the community" (Bank of Canada, 2016). The store was first established in her family home but then grew to be a standalone store on Gottingen Street (Robson, 2010). Her self-made and hand-crafted products expanded: face powder, perfumes, lipsticks, hair dye, hair pomade, hair pieces, falls, chignons and wigs (Bingham and Yarhi, 2013; Robson, 2010). Within a few years, she established the *Desmond School of Beauty Culture* which drew students from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec (Bank of Canada, 2016). She also created another enterprise to manufacture, market and sell her products (*Vi's Beauty Products*) and generated orders from across Nova Scotia (Bank of Canada, 2016). She was regarded as a role model and community leader and inspired those around her (Bank of Canada, 2016). Eventually, Viola left Nova Scotia to study business in Montreal and then moved to New York to start a business as an actor's business agent.

A Civil Rights Leader

Her success as an entrepreneur (particularly as a young black business woman in segregated society) is largely overshadowed by her role as a reluctant defender³ of social justice and human rights in Canada after the events at the Roseland Theatre in 1946 where she was assaulted by police and arrested for sitting in a 'whites-only' section. She is now regarded as a significant figure in the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in Canada (Wanda Robson & Viola Desmond Collection 2008-2014). Due in large part to her sister's dedication to Viola's case, Desmond received a posthumous Royal Prerogative of Free Mercy Pardon from the Nova Scotia government in April of 2010 (McGraw-Hill Education, 2017).

¹ An African American entrepreneur, philanthropist, political and social activist, and the first self-made millionaire; starting the *C.J. Walker School of Beauty Culture* (Walker died in 1919).

² Her sister Wanda recalls the name of the store as *Viola Desmond's Beauty Store* (Robson, 2010, p. 41) though several other sources indicate it was *Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture*.

³ Viola was asked to become a spokesperson with the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, but declined (Canada's Walk of Fame, 2017).

She was portrayed on a commemorative stamp by Canada Post in 2012, featured in a government television feature *Heritage Minute* in 2016; inducted to Canada's Walk of Fame in 2017; and in 2018, she became the first Canadian woman to appear on a Canadian banknote (Canada's Walk of Fame, 2017).

An Overlooked Story

Viola's past is largely shared through the words of her sister, Wanda. Wanda clearly wishes her sister's tremendous accomplishments to be remembered and *written into the history books*. She deserves validation. Viola's story is interesting because it is so powerful politically and her sister's efforts to honour Viola are so inspiring. So frequently do we now hear the story of Viola's remarkable bravery, that she has become a symbol, reified and known only in association with others, be it Rosa Parks or CJ Walker, or with certain social phenomena, like civil rights (not management or entrepreneurship). None of this diminishes the remarkable life of Viola. However, the result has been an incredible emphasis on the Viola's value to the civil rights movement in Canada at the cost of her potential lessons around female mentorship, feminine leadership and black entrepreneurship. I believe she can be remembered as both a civil rights advocate and pioneering entrepreneur. Her story is an important one for youth and business leaders.

Appreciating Her Contributions and Her Context

To fully appreciate Viola's lost contributions to management and entrepreneurship, we must contextualize her story in the broader discourse of black entrepreneurship and the experience of black women. She was a forerunner of a new model of business and she lived in a time not only oppressive to women, but to all people of colour. For her, the advantages of accessible higher education and vocational training were withheld. She lived in segregated society.

Blacks in North America have complex cultural origins and historical experiences (informed by the legacies of colonialism, slavery and immigration) which shaped (and arguably continue to shape) economic life (Knight, 2004). “The labor market was segregated by gender and racially stratified” (Mills, J. 2015, p. 419). For black women, we can add to this complex framing: sexual aggression, battery and rape, to a broader understanding of the shared experience in a system of domination and oppression (see Crenshaw, 1993). According to critical scholars, the current study of ethnic entrepreneurship examines the experiences of predominantly entrepreneurial males and immigrant groups’ inclination towards self-employment (Knight, 2004; Mills, J., 2015).

Black women are cast in history routinely as *domestic social capital* (i.e. caregivers) not enterprising individuals (Knight, 2004). Further, entrepreneurial business activity is largely framed as organizing around specific ethnic markets and locations⁴ in an informal or “underground economy” (Knight, 2004, p. 105), firmly placing it outside of theorized and accepted capitalist modes of production.

More recently, black entrepreneurship has been theorized as a *cultural practice* in the context of *black diasporic discourses* (Walcott, 2003). Black feminists have been exploring the intersection of race, class and gender to understand identity and subjectivities and inform praxis (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; Mills, J. 2015). And many have found that black women’s experience is not widely understood (see Carbado, 2013). Thus, individuals like Viola become hidden.

Viola’s story offers rich insight into the entrepreneurial journey of a woman who challenges the prevailing narrative and disrupts the patterns of inquiry and current historicizing of labour activity as nothing more than the survival work of exceptional men of colour, to one to include feminine models and feminine lessons. She makes what has been largely invisible, visible and tangible.

Viola, The Entrepreneur

Much of our understanding of Viola’s orientation toward business and entrepreneurial approach is shared through her sister’s recollections and story-telling.

Wanda Robson describes her sister as a young woman who was **committed to learning** as her parents stressed education and reading. She trained as a teacher, one of the few occupations open to her, and then used her wages to procure professional development out of the country. She did what was necessary to chase her dream and to learn and grow as a **professional** in her field – an entirely **new industry** in Canada.

As an entrepreneur and business owner, she was very **focused**: “being there for her customers came first, and second or third was herself” (Robson, 2010, p. 44). She was **dedicated** and **hardworking**: “she worked full days, six day a week” (p. 42).

Viola developed a personal **brand identity**. Her reputation was everything. Her image appeared on all of her products, which she made by hand. Her name was associated with all of her business activities (salon, training school and product sales). She was an **innovator** and a **craftswoman**, committed to **quality**: “Viola made hairpieces, falls, chignons and wigs. That was a very painstaking process, it takes a long time” (Robson, 2010, p. 41).

⁴ Knight (2004) cites the work of Portes (1981) and the lens of ethnic enclave theory.

Like many great leaders, she was exceedingly *generous*. She took care of those around her, by supporting her family, creating a community space in her studio for women to gather and meet, and offering her services for free when needed: “Viola did hair for the girls going to the proms, dances, even funerals [...] that work was always gratis” (Robson, 2010, p. 40).

Viola also continued to expand her business. She not only created a new industry, but she also expanded its reach west to New Brunswick and Quebec. She also continued to create new products and services. She was also a skilled *mentor and teacher*. She was keen for more young black women to have careers and be successful.

Beyond Beauty – A Gift of Dignity, Comfort and Confidence

Viola products and services were about more than just beauty; she gave women the gift of dignity. Access to products designed specifically for the needs of black women’s hair and skin meant that an entire community of women could be pampered. Her services and products reduced feelings of shame and stigma, and helped black women navigate a complex classist and racist environment. When an environment offers neither industry or society inclusion, Viola’s services provided a bridge to confidence, empowerment and acceptance. Such acceptance often meant access, employment and success.

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