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Florenz Webbe Maxwell

Mrs. Florenz Maxwell was born in Bermuda and was a key member of the Progressive Group who led the Theater Boycotts in June 1959. A retired librarian and an award-winning author, Mrs. Maxwell's dedication was critical in ending segregation in Bermuda. Her book, *Girlcott*, received second place in the Burt Award in 2016 and has been featured in Oprah Winfrey's magazine. Bermuda was not segregated by law like the United States or South Africa during her childhood, it was segregated by policy therefore most people were unaware of the segregation in Bermuda. With her husband and other young people who had been away and had witnessed racial integration, they formed an underground group called the Progressive Group. Mrs. Maxwell's actions and perseverance should inspire all of us to take action to change law and policy around us.

Mrs. Maxwell went to school in the Central School, now called Victor Scott, and loved writing from a very young age. She grew up in a home where reading was important, and she was read bedtimes stories. While reading the children novels *The Bobbsey Twins* by Laura Lee Hope, she was bothered by the fact that the butler and the cook, both black, were depicted as being more stupid than the other characters. Mrs. Maxwell was confused by this as the adults she knew in her life were not stupid at all. While complaining to her mother about the derogatory manner in which the butler and cook were being portrayed, her mother encouraged her to write her own book so that she could shape the characters how she wanted. Mrs. Maxwell started writing stories in her exercise books and her excited classmates would line up to be able to read her stories. At that moment she knew she wanted to write books but had no idea that you could write books for money and that it wasn't only for fun. She recalls in an interview with the *Royal Gazette Magazine* that "writing kept me out of trouble." Mrs. Maxwell also said that she practiced bibliotherapy and that it meant that she never smoked not because she was good but because it kept her occupied. This love for reading and writing kept her going throughout her life and had a great influence on her professional journey.

Mrs. Maxwell wanted to live abroad to be able to work in a publishing house, but her husband, Clifford Maxwell, never wanted to. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell went to England for one year for Mr. Maxwell's studies and during that time Mrs. Maxwell brought her two sons to the children's library. One day the librarian at the library told Mrs. Maxwell that she should become a librarian

since she loved books so much. Unfortunately, the library in Bermuda was segregated and Mrs. Maxwell wasn't able to study librarianship because she wouldn't be able to get a job. However, she eventually became a children librarian in Bermuda. Her first job in the library was messenger but she earned so little money that she was ashamed to go to the bank with only one check, so she let them pile up before taking them. Mrs. Maxwell later studied librarianship to earn a degree. While in college she entered a short story competition since there was money involved and she needed it to pay her bills. Much to her amazement, she won the first prize. When she came back to Bermuda, she went on to be a librarian for twenty-seven years.

Her award-winning book *Girlcott* is based on the story of the theater riot in Bermuda. It covers many topics from racism to segregation and although Mrs. Maxwell had difficulty getting it published, it has now been very successful. She wrote it as a fiction book rather than non-fiction because that is what she preferred writing. The main character in her story, Desma, is a sixteen-year-old girl leading the theater boycotts just like Mrs. Maxwell did in 1959. She says that she feels "blessed" that her dreams have been accomplished at her age.

Segregation has a unique history in Bermuda as it is very different to other places in the world. The House of Assembly passed two Abolition acts in 1834 which abolished slavery and civil disabilities based on race. However, most public services such as the post office, the hospital, hotels, and theaters became private and segregation became policy. The policy divided the two races although visitors to the island didn't realize that segregation still existed in Bermuda. Black Member of Parliament tried to create legislative change but were unable to do so due to the fact that they were a minority. However, a group of young people who had been away and had witnessed racial mixing came back to Bermuda and created an underground anonymous group to fight segregation called the Progressive Group. They stayed anonymous to avoid being jailed or having their families lose property over the protests. Mrs. Maxwell and her husband were an important part of the Progressive Group and worked with other members to plan out the boycotts. The Progressive Group organized the boycotts on the theaters since most Bermudians went there so it would have a greater impact. The letters calling people to boycott were typed so that it couldn't be traced back to the Progressive Group and the flyers were put up on telephone poles. The results were almost instantaneous, and two weeks later Bermuda started to desegregate although the identity of the Progressive Group was only revealed forty years later in a film entitled "When Voices Rise".

Overall, Mrs. Florenz Maxwell is not only a talented author but has changed the Bermudian legal system forever. Her and other heroes and heroines have helped shape Bermuda into the place it is now and make this island a better place. Although their work was great, a lot still has to be done in the Bermudian legal system, and all of us can make change happen. Her work is still appreciated to this day, and it is an inspiration for all to strive in what they believe in.