

Cheryl Elizabeth Brown Wattley. 2014. *A Step Toward Brown v. Board of Education: Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher and Her Fight to End Segregation*. University of Oklahoma Press, pp. 328.

Cheryl Elizabeth Brown Wattley is Professor of Law and Director of Experiential Learning at the University of North Texas, Dallas, College of Law. She previously taught at the University of Oklahoma College of Law, where she first began her research into the life and case of Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher. Having had the privilege of being taught by Professor Wattley during her time at OU Law, I was able to observe and experience first-hand her fascination and respect of Sipuel Fisher's life and the legal impact that she and her case had in the assault on segregation. Wattley has compiled her years of research about the case and the plaintiff, which now shines through in this insightful and intelligently written text. She is able to capture not only the historical and ground-breaking impact of Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma et al., but also the unassuming but powerfully driven individual behind the cause. Sipeul Fisher wanted nothing more than to receive a quality legal education and accomplish her dream of becoming an attorney and was willing to do whatever it took to accomplish that goal, even if it meant enduring years of self-sacrifice, frustration, setbacks, and personal turmoil in order to pave the way for others to also accomplish their dreams and to ultimately further her society and nation as a whole.

Along with chronicling Sipuel Fisher's three-year battle she undertook from 1946-1949 to break the color barrier and attend OU Law, the author also examines the overall racial climate of the town of Norman, Oklahoma, the state, and even the nation as a whole during the early to

mid-1900's. Oklahoma was one of the strongest and staunchest holdouts against any type of racial integration, and in her analysis of this era, Wattley lays the groundwork to show just how heroic and risky was Sipuel Fisher's decision to challenge this long-held practice. The personal sacrifice and sometimes torment that Sipuel Fisher endured for so long in order to receive a valid legal education alongside whites is nothing short of remarkable.

After a brief history lesson and background of Oklahoma's segregation practices, race riots, and legislative enactments regarding the separation of races, Wattley transitions into an examination of the life and legal cases of Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher. As the author mentions in the book's preface, the extent to which she pored over countless newspaper articles, thousands of pages of NAACP documents, legal pleadings, transcripts, historical documents, and interview transcripts is quite evident. Wattley notices even the slightest detail in what had to be monotonous to review, and is able to humanize these historical writings and portray the emotion and struggle behind them. Wattley is exceptionally detailed in her explanation of the legal maneuverings by all parties during each stage of Sipuel Fisher's state and federal cases. The author is able to convey the sense of exhausting frustration suffered by the NAACP's lawyers and plaintiff due to the various loopholes and delay tactics utilized by the defendants at all stages of litigation, as well as those used by the state courts in misinterpreting and misconstruing the U.S. Supreme Court's pointed ruling, released in astounding speed just four days after oral argument, that "The petitioner...is entitled to secure legal education afforded by a state institution...and [the defendant must] provide it as soon as it does for applicants of any other group."

One of the most sobering portions of the book notes that after all of the struggles against segregation in Oklahoma, Sipuel Fisher was not in fact the first black student allowed to enroll at the University of Oklahoma. Many black students seeking graduate degrees in other areas such as social work and education were allowed to enroll at OU because of Sipuel Fisher's ongoing case, which had established that the

state must allow admission to blacks when pursuit of graduate degrees in their chosen fields of study were not available to be pursued at separate and equal segregated universities. Yet Sipuel Fisher was continually denied admission due to Oklahoma's new "separate but equal" Langston School of Law. This was Oklahoma's embarrassing and all-out ridiculous attempt to avoid the U.S. Supreme Court's mandate in the Sipuel Fisher case, by which the Oklahoma Supreme Court ordered the Board of the University of Oklahoma set up a "substantially equal" black law school in just seven days in order to prevent Sipuel Fisher's second attempt at admittance into OU Law. The defendants then argued with straight faces that Sipuel Fisher should still be denied admittance at OU Law because she could now obtain a legal education of equal value and caliber at Langston School of Law as that being offered at OU, even though she would likely be the only student attending and be taught by three hastily hired faculty members at a "school" to be located in dusty spare rooms at the state capitol building and funded with emergency funds that would expire after one year.

The author examines in great detail the testimony given regarding the comparisons and conditions of the two law schools, and explains Sipuel Fisher's staunch decision of refusing to attend Langston Law, which was eventually closed for obvious reasons, and instead continuing to pursue her fight for OU Law admission. Not doing so would undermine not only the personal fight she had endured for so long, but also hinder the NAACP's continuous fight against all forms of segregation. Hopeful students coming behind her were depending on the success of her case.

Finally, Sipuel Fisher's ultimate admission and graduation from OU Law is chronicled, including not only her academic success, but her continued championship for equal rights post-graduation and bar admission. The book concludes by recognizing the numerous awards and accolades which Sipuel Fisher eventually received for her self-sacrifice, hard work, dedication, and leadership during a time that many

were afraid or became too worn down in the face of opposition to pursue.

This book offers a poignant reminder of the not-so-famous individuals who endured so much for so long in order to pave the road for the cornerstone segregation cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education*. In spite of Oklahoma's disconcerting and embarrassing history regarding race and segregation, the author also takes care and attention to make note that the opposition that Fisher-Sipuel received in her plight to attend OU Law was not primarily from the OU's students and administrators, a majority of whom supported her admission all along, or from the state's citizens as a whole. She received considerable support from many groups such as those led by college students, churches, and various clubs throughout the state. As with most things even today, it was a struggle between the politics of the time, deeply rooted traditions, however wrong, and the struggle of a state legislature and judiciary to catch up and adapt to changing sociological theory.

Due to the in-depth analysis of the procedural aspects and legal maneuverings regarding the cases, this book would certainly appeal to students and faculty with a background or interest in law, but the historical, biographical, and political undertones would also make this book relevant in other areas of study or for those interested in procuring a deeper understanding of the struggles and advances leading up to the Civil Rights Movement.

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