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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5k14d5k7>

Journal

KQED web

Author

Alexandra, Rae

Publication Date

2022-07-29

REBEL GIRLS FROM BAY AREA HISTORY

The Sorority Sister Who Battled Racism in Berkeley and Beyond

Rae Alexandra KQED
Jul 29, 2022

REBEL
GIRLS



After Vivian Osborne graduated from high school in

1914, she applied to study anthropology at U.C. Berkeley. A gifted student, she had earned outstanding grades at both Berkeley High and, prior to that, Houston High School. But it wasn't enough.

At the time, U.C. Berkeley refused to admit any student who had been schooled even partially in Southern states unless that student also passed four additional entrance exams. Osborne completed only two—she was excused from the last couple because her results on the first two were so good. So exceptional, in fact, that her example prompted Berkeley to permanently scrap its discriminatory policies against students from the South.

Sacramento's First Black Principal Fought Tirelessly for Children of Color

That was just the first time that Vivian would transform U.C. Berkeley for the better. Not only was Vivian the first Black woman to ever major in anthropology at the university, she was also one of the first two women to earn a master's degree there. (The other was [Belinda Davison Mabson](#).) Vivian's master's thesis, titled *Types and Distribution of Negro Folklore in America*, successfully argued that many American children's classics were, in fact, stories that originated in Africa.

"In America alone," she wrote, "stories that the Negro brought over from Africa with him have either been preserved in their native forms, worked entirely over ... or are altered in order to suit the surroundings." She earned High Honors for her research.

It was while working toward her master's degree that Vivian founded the first Black sorority at Berkeley, modeling the Kappa chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority after the one founded at Howard University in 1913. Like the original, the Kappa chapter was dedicated to both "academic excellence and social service." Vivian acted as the sorority's first president. By that time, Vivian understood implicitly the power garnered from working in organized groups. Throughout her academic life, she had been a member of [the Phillis Wheatley Club](#)—part of the California State Association for Colored Women, of which Vivian would be elected president in 1941.

After Vivian graduated in 1922, she embraced a life of activism, public service and leadership full-time. She and her new husband, Leon F. Marsh, lived at 2838 Grant Street in Berkeley, which quickly became a crucial hub for community organizers and political groups. Vivian was involved with so many, it's genuinely hard to keep track of them all. It seems if there was a club actively fighting racism, sexism or both, Vivian was in it. Through her association with the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, she became active with the [National Association of Colored Women's Clubs](#), which was focused on civil rights and improving conditions for the Black community. Vivian was a member of the [YWCA](#) and the [Berkeley Women's Civic Club](#). In 1928, she became director of the Oakland junior branch of the [NAACP](#)—she would work alongside the anti-racist organization in one way or another for the rest of her life. And in 1929, Vivian established the Omega Sigma Alumna Chapter so that U.C. Berkeley women could continue their involvement in Delta Sigma Theta after they'd graduated. (She was Omega Sigma's first president.) In fact, Vivian's work for the sorority never ceased. In 1948, she and her sister Bessie founded the

Patroness Club—a group of women who acted as mother figures to female pledges who were far from home.

The Oakland Tribune Journalist Who Highlighted Black Excellence

In 1931, while serving as secretary for the Northern Board of the California Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Vivian fought hard to stop a racist bill that would have segregated children in recreational areas. The proposed law was written in response to a [battle in Los Angeles to integrate public pools](#). Letters co-written by Vivian were reproduced in full in the *Oakland Tribune* as part of [Delilah Beasley's "Activities Among Negroes" column](#).

One letter to [Frederick M. Roberts](#), the first African American man to be elected to the California State Assembly read:

Dear Sir: The California Federation of Colored Women's clubs ... on the 6th day of January 1931, have unanimously gone on record as protesting the passage of the discriminatory act sponsored by the League of California Municipalities. This bill proposes to discriminate against colored boys and girls by setting aside for them certain hours and days in public playgrounds and swimming pools. Speaking for the thousands of colored voters, we petition you to use your best efforts before the legislature to prevent the passage of this bill.

The legislation was defeated.

Later in the decade, Vivian campaigned relentlessly at universities and women's clubs to help get anti-lynching legislation passed. In 1938, the *California Eagle* newspaper reported on a lecture-reception Vivian was hosting: "Her appearance in Los Angeles is expected to draw throngs and ovations similar to that received in the South," it wrote, "especially at Fisk University where [writer and civil rights activist] [James Weldon Johnson](#) gave up his scheduled appearance in order that students might hear her."

The *Eagle* quoted Vivian as saying, “If we keep constantly demanding of our senators that they vote for it, the [Wagner-Van Nuys-Gavagan anti-lynching] bill will be passed. Many of them are coming up for reelection and women’s auxiliaries should know those who supported the measure and use their vote accordingly.”

The anti-lynching bill ultimately failed to pass after four senators from Texas, Georgia and Florida filibustered for 30 days straight to block it. But the frustrating failure did nothing to dull Vivian’s fighting spirit.

Throughout the 1930s, Vivian was focused on helping young Black people across the nation. In California, she was Supervisor of the State Federation of Colored Girls. As part of her role as Delta Sigma Theta’s national president (1935-’39), she organized a traveling library for children in rural Georgia. Then she created a program called Teen Lift, which covered travel and ticket costs for underprivileged Black children to attend operas, symphonies, concerts and other live events. During the Great Depression, Vivian was the first Black woman on the West Coast to take on the position of state supervisor of the National Youth Organization. Working in the Division of Negro Affairs, she was tasked with finding jobs for unemployed people of color between the ages of 16 and 25 and ensuring that other parts of the organization were free from discriminatory practices.

A Century Before Rosa Parks, She Fought Segregated Transit in SF

The advent of World War II did nothing to slow Vivian down. She took it upon herself to be a unit commander of the Women’s Ambulance and Defense Corps of America. The

women were trained in first aid, ambulance driving, nursing, rescue work, radio operations and infantry drills. They also sold war bonds and visited veterans in the hospital. By 1944, Vivian was so revered, she was invited to christen a Navy cargo ship (the S.S. Ocean Telegraph) in Oakland before it took its maiden voyage. She was elected vice-president of the [National Council of Negro Women](#) in 1945, and quickly formed smaller councils in Oakland, Richmond, Fresno and Sacramento to aid in the organization's civil rights work.

In the 1950s, Vivian tackled social issues on both the political and personal fronts. An active member of the Republican party, she sat on the Alameda County Republican Central Committee and the State Republican Legislative Council. She also provided her home as a space where [Senator Joseph R. Knowland](#) could connect with members of the public. But she was known to offer advice on racial issues to Democrats too, including [State Senator Nicholas C. Petris](#). Later in the decade, Berkeley's city council appointed her to their Planning Commission.

In the 1950s and '60s, Vivian worked with her husband to establish fraternal organizations. She helped establish nine lodges, each of which provided scholarship grants to students, and donations of money, food and clothing to members of the community in need.

Vivian would go on to live her whole life in the house at 2838 Grant Street. She and Leon raised two sons there—Roy Curtin Osborne and Leon F. Marsh Jr., who grew up to be the first Black firefighter in Berkeley. She stayed in the home even after Leon Jr. died in 1956 and Leon Sr. passed in 1968.

Vivian made it to age 88. She suffered a stroke in 1986, while at a convention, and passed away soon after.

The marks she made on the community were not quickly forgotten, however. In 1981, the city of Berkeley declared Feb.

21 Vivian Osborne Marsh Day—a small token of gratitude for a life spent tirelessly in community service.

Original article: <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13916612/u-c-berkeley-sorority-founder-divine-9-naacp-delta-sigma-theta-ambulance-defense-corps>