Social Rights Pioneer: Gilbert Gray

Gilbert Gray was born in Tatum, Texas, on November 22, 1916. He was born the third out of six children, and his life was characterized by a strong work ethic and rich in history. In the year 1935, Gilbert married Alice Hall and together with his family, they moved to California in 1945 and settled in Marin County. In 1952, Gilbert and Alice moved their family of nine children to Santa Rosa, where they both lived until their passing.

During the early 1950s, the City of Santa Rosa was segregated, and African American families primarily occupied the area of South Park. Opportunities for minorities at the time were limited and motivated to seek equal opportunity, Gilbert helped organize and raise funds that helped establish the Community Baptist Church in Santa Rosa. He became an activist by protesting against segregation, putting his life at risk by participating in sit-ins at the Silver Dollar Saloon, a place that refused service to Black customers.

Any time he was not working, Gray dedicated his time to politics and civil rights. He and Platt Williams attended a NAACP Convention in San Francisco in the early 1950s, where they both met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1953, Gray, along with Williams, co-founded the Santa Rosa-Sonoma County Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and later filled the position of president. The NAACP pushed for the advancement opportunities successfully and provided much-needed services for the Black community. During this time, alliances were created with real estate executives and local investments that paved the way to end structural discrimination. Gray also went to other communities outside of Sonoma County to help with the formation of other NAACP chapters. In 1963, he attended the March on Washington and was noted to be the only Santa Rosa resident to participate in the march and rally.

Tragedy struck the Gray family when one of Gilbert's sons, Curley, was injured during a football game. He was set to have surgery, but unfortunately, due to an error, Curley was administered a high dose of anesthesia. This led to a coma before being disconnected from a respirator that maintained his life. When the family of Curley filed charges against the hospital, the court ruled in favor of the hospital. This unfortunate event left deep scars within the family and community members; however, not everything was lost. While pain filled the family members – it also turned into something powerful that led the family to move on – many of the young family members went on to study law and become attorneys and other law professionals.

It is not known with exactitude what the family's social status was during those early years, but one thing that is certain is that the Gray family remained humbled and fierce in the pursuit of social and racial justice and transformed the face of Sonoma County forever. With the help of community members, Gilbert and Alice established the Curly Gray Scholarship fund at

Montgomery High School, donated $25,000 to the NAACP's National Scholarship Program, and with $150,000, established the Gray Foundation in 1992.

Gilbert Gray left a lasting impact on Sonoma County. As a "Freedom Fighter," activist, and fearless advocate, he deserves to be remembered. His actions and contributions helped to transform Santa Rosa. He opened the door of opportunities for the underrepresented community. He inspired many to realize their attitudes and provoked social responsibility with his kindness and impact. On April 13, 1977, Gilbert Gray passed away, but he left behind a powerful legacy that continues to touch individuals, create change, and that is kept alive through the Gray family.

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