The teenage Pauli Murray said, “No more segregation for me.” She went north and worked to end it tirelessly and prominently — and invisibly in her native North Carolina. Rejected by UNC, she had a poignant, triumphant homecoming.

By Barry Yeoman
The deep echoes of history were hardly lost on the worshippers packing the Chapel of the Cross on a Sunday morning in February 1977. Standing before them was Pauli Murray, the first African American woman ordained by the Episcopal Church in the United States. The descendant of a Chapel Hill family, she was a former civil rights lawyer whose scholarship had proven critical to the desegregation case Brown v. Board of Education. She had helped write gender equality into the law and went on to co-found the National Organization for Women.

On that day, at 66, she was a priest, celebrating her first Eucharist at the Chapel Hill church where her enslaved grandmother had been baptized. Murray cut an unassuming figure, her salt-and-pepper hair cut short and her face framed in tortoise-shell glasses. But her words soared, carrying a promise of redemption.

From the pulpit, Murray described a scene from the previous month. Two thousand people had filled Washington National Cathedral to watch her and two other women enter a priesthood that, until only days earlier, had been limited to men.

“...The congregation could hardly contain themselves,” she said. “They did everything but speak in tongues. People embraced and wept and almost danced in the aisle.” A Washington Post reporter described the “happy chaos” that erupted during the traditional exchange of the peace. “Considering the reputation of Episcopalians of being God’s frozen people,” Murray quipped, “it was a great victory for the thaw."

This, Murray said, was a religious milestone. But it also marked “the visible beginning of the second American Revolution.” Murray imagined the reconciliation of neighbors divided by “race, or color, or religion, or sex in the gender sense, or age, or sex preference, or political and theological differences, or economic or social status.”

More personally, that day in Chapel Hill was Murray’s homecoming. In 1918, when she was 28, the University rejected her application to attend its graduate program in sociology. State law, at the time, mandated that UNC could only admit whites. “North Carolina does not believe in social equality,” Gov. Clyde Hoey had bluntly declared. UNC President Frank Porter Graham (class of 1909) was more sympathetic, but he said his hands were tied by the Legislature and popular opinion.

“I am under very bitter attack for what little I have tried to do in behalf of Negro people,” Graham wrote to Murray. “I understand the limitations under which we must work in order to make the next possible advance.”

Rejected in her home state, detesting segregation, Murray built a life in the North as a civil rights pioneer. Her ideas influenced Thurgood Marshall, Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Eleanor Roosevelt — and today, Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Eleanor Roosevelt — and today, almost 35 years after her death, they continue to pepper conversations about legal equality.

Bookending her career are two events: one rebuff and one reconciliation. Both took place in the same town. Preaching at the Chapel of the Cross, Murray made the connection clear: “A victim of The University of North Carolina’s rejection in 1938, 39 years ago, stands before you today in Chapel Hill, the site of that rejection, proclaiming the healing power of Christ’s love.”

The legacy she inherited

The past few years have brought into stark relief the long reach of American slavery. The first slave ship bound for the English colonies arrived on the Virginia coast in 1619, and last year’s 400th anniversary sparked a colossal reporting project by The New York Times. North Carolinians wrestle with the meaning of a statue of a Confederate soldier that stood on Carolina’s campus. Similar reckonings have taken place over monuments from Washington, D.C., to Austin, Texas. In this context, no historic figure seems more relevant than Pauli Murray, a North Carolinian and an Episcopal saint.

Some of Murray’s ancestral relatives were enslaved. Others were key figures in University history — local “aristocracy,” said Erik Gellman, an associate professor of history at UNC. One branch of the family owned the other, even though they all were related. “That story really matters here,” Gellman said, “because it shows generations of racial terror and the kind of sexual power that existed in the South that never was talked about.”

Murray’s great-grandmother was named Harriet Smith. She was purchased for $450 in 1834, when she was 15. In Mur-
Murray as a high school graduate in 1927. She was headed for New York to attend Hunter College. In December 1938, when she was rejected for admission to a graduate program at UNC, she wrote immediately to Frank Porter Graham, who sympathized but wrote: "I am under very bitter attack for what little I have tried to do in behalf of Negro people." This telegram appears to be a newspaper’s request for the name of the spurned student.

Ray’s 1956 book Proud Shoes, she described the young woman as “small and shapely, (with) richly colored skin like the warm inner bark of a white birch, delicate features, and luxuriant wavy black hair which fell below her knees.”

Harriet Smith belonged to Mary Ruffin Smith, a white woman from a prominent family who later would become one of UNC’s benefactors. Mary Ruffin Smith bequeathed the family’s land to the University, which sold the acreage to fund student scholarships and finance the campus’s electric, water and sewer systems.

Ray trained the workers to form unions, file grievances and bargain with management. She was arrested picketing the Amsterdam News, a black newspaper that had locked out its workers. And she spent six months at Brookwood Labor College in the Hudson Valley, where she studied labor economics and journalism and assisted striking automotive workers.

In New York, Murray developed the political lens she would carry for most of her life. One of her first post-college jobs, in the 1930s, was teaching workers their rights at a division of President Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration. Working alongside an assortment of intellectuals — “young socialists, young Trotskyites, young Republicans” — Murray trained the workers to form unions, file grievances and bargain with management. They were "young socialists, young Trotskyites, young Republicans" — Murray trained the workers to form unions, file grievances and bargain with management.

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Murray had mixed feelings. “She is petrified of the idea of returning South,” said Bell-Scott. “But if she had the option of going to Chapel Hill would mean that she could stay at home, so wouldn’t have the cost of housing.”

Relatives bristled at the thought of Murray’s applying to the all-white UNC. They were afraid they would be lynched,” she later told McNeil, “but the house would burn down.” Still, Murray felt encouraged by the handful of liberal professors at Carolina. And the law was shifting in her favor. As she waited for a response, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the University of Missouri’s law school to admit a well-qualified African American applicant.

Two days after the court’s ruling, Murray received a letter informing her that, under state law, “members of your race are not admitted to the University.” Separate black graduate programs were coming to North Carolina, Dean William Pierson assured her. But he could offer no details.

By then, Murray had made the case for desegregation in a letter to President Roosevelt. He didn’t respond, but his wife did, warning that “great mistakes are being made. Our society is ready to listen.”

Murray’s legal career zigged and zagged. She ran a solo practice, worked for a large firm and held a number of government positions. She taught at a law school in Ghana. In 1968, she became a professor at Rutgers Law School, listed Murray as one of two honorary authors of Ginsburg’s first U.S. Supreme Court brief in 1971. In that paper arguing that segregation was inherently unconstitutional. However, Murray had written the纸as they developed their winning arguments for Brown v. Board of Education.

Like Murray, Ginsburg was trained as a civil rights lawyer. She had warned, “there seemed to be even greater and more subtle forms of discrimination.”

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But Murray argued that racism and sexism were intertwined and that allowing one type of bias would hand employers a loophole. “It is exceedingly difficult for a Negro woman to determine whether she is being discriminated against because of race or sex,” she wrote.

Murray’s memo was distributed to senators and the White House. A staffer for Lady Bird Johnson, the first lady, responded and offered the administration’s support. Despite considerable pushback, Murray’s legal career was sustained. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which Congress was considering, would outlaw job discrimination on the basis of sex.

In her book Defying Dixie, “and the nation gained a social activist.”

Murray’s commitment to human rights was undiminished, she said. But she had lost confidence that her path was the right one.

“I am not the vigorous, swashbuckling activist of my thirties,” she told McNeil, “the UNC historian, two years later. “How one can use one’s energies in one’s sixties may be quite different from what one does in the thirties.”

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Likewise, Murray was completing a doctorate at Yale Law School when she was asked by a number of federal employees to write a memo arguing that job discrimination against women should be outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which Congress was debating. Not everyone in the movement shared this view. The National Urban League insisted that African American women “should make their primary goal the lifting of the social, economic and educational status of their men.”

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“Murray did not fit that. The NAACP’s always looking for the perfect respectable plaintiff,” Gehman said. “Murray did not fit that.”

But the organization declined to take her case, noting that Murray was not a North Carolina resident and that her legal radicalism might offend a conservative judge.

Still unknown is whether Murray’s personal life also worked against her. She struggled with gender dysphoria long before there was such a word as transgender. She felt same-sex attractions and had been hospitalized for psychiatric treatment. “The NAACP’s always looking for the perfect respectable plaintiff,” Gehman said. “Murray did not fit that.”

At Howard Law School in the 1940s, Murray wrote a paper arguing that separate-but-equal was a losing strategy and that litigators should use the 13th and 14th amendments to argue that segregation was inherently unconstitutional. Her classmates mocked her position as radical. But a decade later, Marshall and his colleagues used her paper as they developed their winning arguments for Brown v. Board of Education.

“There’s no document in the archive that’s going to have [special counsel] Charles Hamilton Houston talking to Thurgood Marshall and saying, ‘We can’t do Murray’s case. She’s queer.’ But you have to wonder.”

Winning arguments
With her UNC plans thwarted, Murray looked for another career path, eventually settling on civil rights law. “In 1963, I asked for a raise of $2,000 for my work on the University’s behalf, and she met with NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall.

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American history is that human rights are indivisible. They cannot be affirmed for one social group and ignored in the case of another without tragic consequences.”

Murray helped set in motion a law that, more than a half century later, will finally protect people like herself: a gender-non-conforming woman of color who loved other women. This, in a sense, is her vindication. “She wanted to create the world in which she could actually show up and not be discriminated against,” Lau said. “You can look at that as prophetic. But in some sense it was very practical. It was very much based on fighting for her own survival.”

The Supreme Court will rule on the Title VII cases this year. Regardless of the outcome, the law already has come closer to Murray’s vision of interconnected rights — the “second American Revolution” she described at the Chapel of the Cross — than it ever did when she was alive. “Pauli Murray wasn’t a woman of her day,” says Lau. “But she is a woman of ours.”

Barry Yeoman is a freelance writer based in Durham.

The Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice hosts an annual celebration in November near her birthday. This year, it is 3 to 5 p.m. Nov. 15 at Lyon Park Community Center, 1313 Halley St., Durham. paulimurrayproject.org/becoming-involved.

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