



RACHEL KEHOE WITH
WANDA ROBSON

THE
TRAILBLAZING
LIFE OF

Viola Desmond

A CIVIL RIGHTS ICON

illustrated by
CHELSEA
CHARLES

CHAPTER SAMPLER

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

*To Isla, Rose, Rhys and all the kids whose courage
helps tilt the world the right way.
And to my husband, Bas, for always believing in me.*

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NOTES FROM WANDA

When I was seven or eight years old, I had a friend, Marjory, who lived across the street from me. We got along really well and loved playing games out in the backyard. Marjory's dad was in the army. Whenever he came home, Marjory wasn't allowed to come out and play with me, and I wasn't allowed to come over to her house. One day I asked her why and Marjory explained, "My dad told me we couldn't play together." My own father was very annoyed when he heard this. He didn't want me to play with Marjory anymore. But my mother and Viola were more understanding. They knew we were just kids who didn't see skin color as a big deal. "They're friends and they don't understand it, so let them play as little girls," my mother said.



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***EQUAL
FROM
THE START***

RUBY BRIDGES

Ruby Bridges was the first Black student to attend an all-white elementary school in the southern United States. On November 14, 1960, when Ruby was six years old, federal marshals escorted her to William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Screaming protesters crowded the pavement and tried to block the entrance. They were angry because they didn't want Ruby at their school. On her first day, Ruby and her mother sat in the principal's office. They watched as the parents of white kids came in throughout the day to remove their kids from school. Some were scared of the protesters. Others didn't want their children to *integrate*.

With 12 years' difference between them, Viola was like a mother to her sister Wanda. Viola would do her sister's hair and they would talk.

When she entered the second grade, Wanda enrolled at a new school called Alexandra Elementary School, a nonsegregated school in the North End of Halifax. She was so excited for her first day. But when Wanda returned home, Viola could tell something wasn't right. Then, a few weeks later, Wanda came home from school in tears. Viola knew Wanda had loved first grade and was a good student. What had happened?

Through gulping sobs, Wanda told Viola and her mother everything that had happened. On the very first day of school, her teacher, Ms. Reid, had sent her to sit at the back with the other Black students. "She completely ignored us," said Wanda.

“The only time she noticed us was when we made a noise and she told us to be quiet.” No matter how hard Wanda tried, Ms. Reid never called on her or let her ask any questions.

Viola was shocked. She couldn’t imagine treating students so unfairly.

Then Wanda told her sister that Ms. Reid had one rule: the kids who got top marks could sit in the front row. “I listened and worked hard,” said Wanda. “On the next exam, I got the highest mark in the class, and Ms. Reid moved me to the front.”

But somehow things only got worse.





Wanda could sense that Ms. Reid was upset with her. She stayed angry the whole day and even seemed frustrated with the other Black students.

“I kept doing well on my tests, and I stayed at the front.” Wanda’s eyes welled up as she told Viola the story. “But a few days later, Ms. Reid was still mad. She got angry every time I raised my hand.”

UNFAIR PUNISHMENT

Ms. Reid had had enough of Wanda. The next time Wanda raised her hand, she said, “Oh look, we have a genius in our class—a girl who knows everything. So what do we do with people who are

too smart for this class? We put them in the next class.” Ms. Reid took Wanda to the third-grade teacher. Wanda heard her teacher say, “This is Wanda Davis. She’s in our class, and she is to go to the back of your room. Don’t give her anything to do. Just make her sit there and think about how she’s showing off in class.”

By now Wanda was crying. The third-grade teacher felt sorry for her and told her to continue with her lessons while in her class. Wanda felt confused. What had she done wrong? After a few weeks Wanda was returned to her old class. But again Ms. Reid sent her right to the back of the room. But the next day was Parents’ Day, and Wanda was upset because she hadn’t told everybody what had happened. “I’m sorry I got in trouble,” Wanda said. “I just don’t know what to do.”

As Viola listened, her lips pressed into a thin line. The following day Viola and her mother went to visit Ms. Reid. Both Davis women had the same temperament. They didn’t get angry, and they never yelled. Viola’s mother had taught her that with poise, determination and courage, she would always succeed.

The day after the meeting, Wanda was pleased to find herself placed back at the front of the room. Viola told Wanda that she hadn’t done anything wrong. “You earned your place at the front of the room and that is where you should sit,” Viola told her. Viola wasn’t about to let Ms. Reid’s prejudice hold her sister back. She wanted her sister to feel proud of who she was.

INSPIRING CHANGE

Meanwhile Viola was starting to wonder about her own future. She had read an article about Madam C.J. Walker, a Black **beautician** and self-made millionaire. She owned a chain of beauty salons in the United States. Madam Walker's talent and success inspired Viola. At the time there were almost no Black beauty salons in Canada. If a Black woman tried going to a salon to have her hair done, she would be refused.

Viola showed the article to her friend and schoolmate Portia White. "I want to do that," she said.

"Well, go ahead and do it," said Portia.

So Viola made a decision that changed the rest of her life. She would become a beautician.

MADAM C.J. WALKER

The daughter of slaves, Madam C.J. Walker was working as a domestic helper when she began to lose her hair. Desperate for her hair to grow back, she invented a mixture to use on her scalp. It worked! In 1905 she started her own business, selling specialized hair products for Black women. Her company hired thousands of door-to-door saleswomen from across the United States. By 1916 the *New York Times* declared her one of the most successful Black female **entrepreneurs** in the United States. Before she died in 1919, Madam Walker was known as the first American woman to become a self-made millionaire.

Is Your Hair Short?

Breaking Off, Thin, or Falling Out?



The Mme. C. J.
Walker Mfg. Co.
640 N. West St., Indianapolis, Ind.

C. J. WALKER

NOTES FROM WANDA

When Viola started her business, there wasn't a single Black beautician working in Halifax. If you were Black and went to a beauty shop, you were turned away. I was denied service at a hairdresser in the 1970s. I entered the shop and was told abruptly by one of the hairdressers, "We don't do you people's hair." So when Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture opened, it was a big deal. Right from the start, her salon attracted many customers. Some were even famous. Gwen Jenkins, who visited Vi's Children's Club when she was just a girl, went on to become the first Black nurse in Nova Scotia. Carrie Best was a civil rights activist, and Portia White was an internationally renowned opera singer. Viola's salon became a popular weekend hangout. The ladies enjoyed Viola's positive and supportive nature.

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CHASING A DREAM



In the 1920s, beauty schools in Halifax did not accept Black women. Once again, like the teachers colleges Viola had applied to, these places were for white students only. Viola was frustrated. She longed to be a beautician. But how could she if there weren't any schools to train her?

Viola began to research beauty schools in other provinces. She came across the Field Beauty Culture School in Montreal. It was a small school on St. Antoine Street. She wrote to the instructor, Maud Field, and received a positive response. Viola felt a spark of hope. But Montreal was 775 miles (1,250 kilometers) away. Tuition plus a train ticket would be expensive.

So Viola kept teaching and saving her money. It took nearly three years. Once she had enough money set aside, she sent in her

application. Viola was accepted. In 1936, at age 22, she boarded a train to Montreal. The train journey took nearly 24 hours. It was the farthest she had ever been from home.

Right before she left, Viola met Jack Desmond. He was the first registered Black barber in Halifax and owner of Jack's Barbershop in the North End. It was a popular place for locals and

THE COLOR LINE CONFIRMED

In July 1936 Fred Christie was denied service at the York Tavern in Montreal because he was Black. Fred took legal action and brought his case to the Supreme Court. In 1939 the court ruled that the bar had the right to deny service based on skin color.



visiting servicemen coming in off ships. The pair met at a dance at the Gerrish Street Hall, where Jack impressed Viola with his modern moves. Together they danced the jitterbug and waltz.

In many ways they were different. Where Viola was elegant and tenacious, Jack was laid-back and loved to entertain. His outgoing personality earned him the nickname “King of Gottingen Street.” Both believed in hard work and shared the same interest in owning a business. Jack admired Viola for her dedication to becoming a trained beautician. He knew she was intelligent and determined. They continued to date while she was away at the Field Beauty Culture School.





Viola was thrilled to be in Montreal. It was a huge, modern city. Skyscrapers stretched high into the sky. An ice rink seated 9,300 spectators. Automobiles swarmed the streets, and the first commercial flights took off from the city's international airport.

In other ways, Montreal was just like Halifax. Black people lived in segregated neighborhoods and often struggled to find well-paying jobs. Restaurants, cinemas and stores still regularly refused Black customers.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Viola had been at school for a few months when Jack decided to make a trip to Montreal to visit her. They were so excited to see each other that during his trip Jack proposed. Before Viola graduated, they got married in Montreal in front of a Baptist minister.

WOMEN HELPING WOMEN

Annie Malone was an early *pioneer* of Black hair care. She was born in 1869 on a farm in Illinois to parents who were former slaves. In high school Annie took an interest in chemistry. She was often ill, however, and was not able to graduate. Annie combined her love of chemistry with her sister's interest in herbal medicine. Together they invented Wonderful Hair Grower, a shampoo that could straighten hair and heal damaged scalps. At the time many women used bacon grease and goose fat as hair straighteners. These harsh methods did a lot of damage to Black hair. Annie patented her shampoo under the name Poro and went on to develop other products that would transform hair care for Black Americans.

Viola returned to Halifax's North End in 1937. Now a trained beautician, she opened Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture on the bottom floor of her parents' house. It was the first hairdressing salon for Black women in Halifax. And an instant success!

She offered various services, including cutting and styling hair for girls going to proms and dances. In addition, she opened Vi's Children's Club, where children could have their hair washed and braided.

Viola was passionate about people and cared about her customers. The younger women looked up to her. Viola took them under her wing and was like a mother to them all.

Viola was living her dream. But really, she was just getting started.