



Life Story: Linda Brown

The seven-year-old girl who became the face of Brown v. Board of Education, an educator, and a lifelong activist

Background

Linda Carol Brown was born on February 20, 1943 in Topeka, Kansas. Her father, Oliver, was a railroad welder and local pastor, and her mom, Leola, was a homemaker. The family lived in a one-story, five-bedroom stone house near the Rock Island switching yard, a busy train junction. While Topeka struggled with racial tensions, it had fewer **Jim Crow laws** than other parts of the country. The Browns—a Black family—lived in a mostly integrated neighborhood. Linda and her two younger sisters grew up playing with kids from different backgrounds. Even so, a Kansas law allowed cities with populations of over 15,000 people, like Topeka, to segregate their elementary schools. Linda attended the all-Black Monroe Elementary School, while her white friends from the neighborhood attended Sumner. She struggled to understand why they couldn't all go to school together. "I didn't comprehend the color of skin," she remembered, "I only knew that I wanted to go to Sumner School."

Unlike other places in the country, Topeka's schools, white and Black, were relatively equal in the quality of education they provided to all students. Linda remembered that Monroe Elementary had "very good teachers" and a "very nice facility." The problem was distance. Monroe was 21 blocks away from the Brown home. To get there, Linda had to leave the house 80 minutes before class started, walk several blocks, traverse through the dangerous railroad switchyard, cross a busy street, and finally board a bus to take her the remaining two miles. In contrast, Sumner Elementary, an all-white school, was four blocks away.

Brown v. Board of Education

Local activists in the Topeka NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) sought **plaintiffs** to bring a case against the Board of Education of Topeka. They hoped to challenge the state law that allowed segregated elementary schools. Oliver Brown, Linda's dad, was recruited by his childhood friend, attorney Charles Scott, to participate in the lawsuit. He joined a group of 12 other plaintiffs representing a total of 20 children. They formed a plan: Each parent would walk to the nearest all-white elementary school and attempt to register their child. In September 1950, Oliver took seven-year-old Linda by the hand and "walked briskly" down the street to Sumner Elementary. He met with the principal while Linda waited in the main office, who worried over the sounds of their rising voices. As expected, the principal refused to register Linda at Sumner. The other 12 parents went to their local all-white schools and, as anticipated, were met with the same result.

The Topeka NAACP filed suit in federal district court on February 28, 1951. Oliver Brown became the

lead plaintiff. A three-judge panel unanimously ruled in favor of the board, reasoning that the physical facilities and other measurable factors between the white and Black elementary schools were equal. The NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, led by Thurgood Marshall, appealed the case. The Supreme Court agreed to hear the appeal, consolidating *Brown* with four other school segregation cases from around the country (*Briggs v. Elliott*, *Bolling v. Sharpe*, *Davis v. County School Board*, and *Belton/Bulah v. Gebhardt*). Three years passed between the district court's ruling and the Supreme Court's decision. During this time, Oliver became the pastor of a church in the northern part of Topeka, and the family moved. Linda transferred to McKinley Elementary school. She still had to walk a significant distance, and was not allowed to attend the nearby all-white elementary school.

On May 17, 1954, the Court unanimously held that school segregation violated the **Fourteenth Amendment** of the Constitution, stating that "separate but equal"...has no place in the field of public education." *Brown* marked a major step in overturning the **precedent** set in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), paving the way for greater equality in the United States. At the same time, it ushered in a new era of racial tensions. Looking back on the decision, Linda remarked that she and her family "lived in the calm of the hurricane's eye." Her mom, Leola, said the family was "blessed to live in Topeka. There were some places where things got so bad they had to shut schools down...but not here." Meanwhile, across the nation, state resistance perpetuated school segregation. Some Southern states refused to comply with the Court's decision, protesting desegregation with **massive resistance** tactics. They used **pupil placement laws**, created **Citizens' Councils**, and denied state funding for segregated schools. In March 1956, approximately 100 elected officials representing the former Confederate states signed the **Southern Manifesto**, a document that asserted *Brown* was wrongly decided. Some school districts, like in Prince Edward County, Virginia, shut down rather than desegregate, depriving Black students of a public education for years.

As a student, Linda never directly benefited from the *Brown decision*. In the fall of 1954 she started junior high school, which Topeka already integrated. Oliver was appointed to a new church and the Brown family moved to Springfield, Missouri in 1959, where Linda attended the integrated Central High School. She consistently earned a place on the honor roll and loved music, a passion that she pursued throughout the rest of her life. Shortly after Linda's graduation, Oliver suffered a fatal heart attack, and the family moved back to Topeka. Linda briefly studied music at Washburn University, but she could not afford to finish her degree. After leaving college, she joined the NAACP, served as the organist in her church, and worked at a mental health treatment facility. In 1963, she married her first husband, Charles D. Smith, and had two children.

As major milestones for the *Brown* decision approached, Linda worried about being exploited by the press. Around the decision's 20th anniversary, Linda, now divorced, recalled receiving round-the-clock phone calls and interview requests. For a period of time, aligning with the 25th anniversary in 1979, she started charging a fee for interviews and speaking engagements, at which

her lawyer was always present. At the same time, she made a career shift. After several years of working nights as a data processing operator at Goodyear, she went back to school at Washburn and began a public speaking circuit. Linda finished her education at Kansas State University, earning certification in early childhood education. She spent several years teaching preschool for Head Start, a federally funded education program for low-income families. She also taught music lessons and accompanied the choirs at her church in Topeka, where her father once pastored, for over 40 years. She remarried twice: first to Leonard Buckner, and then, after his passing, to William L. Thompson.

Legacy

Linda and her family recognized that the work of *Brown* was far from finished. In 1979, Linda, along with a larger group of Black parents, reopened the case. They claimed the Topeka school district failed to desegregate schools after *Brown*. Though the Supreme Court refused to hear the appeal, Linda won her case after a 13-year legal battle. The district court mandated that the school board develop plans to comply with *Brown*, leading the board to open several magnet schools. Additionally, Linda worked closely with the Brown Foundation after her youngest sister, Cheryl, established it in 1988. As the Foundation's Program Associate, Linda opened four libraries for preschool children. She also read to children at preschools in Topeka and Lawrence in her "Reading with Ms. Linda" program. The Brown Foundation's reach expanded far beyond Kansas: The sisters and their mom, Leola, traveled across the country to speak on the significance of *Brown*.

Linda Brown Thompson died on March 25, 2018 at Lexington Park Nursing and Post Acute Center in Kansas at age 75. The little girl who wanted a shorter walk to school became a symbol of the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* and a champion of civil rights. Her lifelong advocacy and her family's role in the case have been honored in many ways. Both Monroe and Sumner Elementary Schools were named national historic landmarks. A larger project, *Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Park*, opened on the grounds of Monroe Elementary on the decision's 50th anniversary. The park will soon expand to include sites related to the other four cases consolidated in *Brown*. The town of Manhattan, an hour outside of Topeka, honored the decision by opening Oliver Brown Elementary School in 2021, and hosted Leola, Cheryl, and other family members at the dedication ceremony. *Brown v. Board of Education* celebrated its 70th anniversary on May 17, 2024.

Vocabulary

- **Jim Crow laws** – refer to the legalized segregation of the Black population of the United States in schools, restaurants, public transportation, and other institutions or facilities, and the denial of the right to vote, after the Civil War up until the 1960s.
- **Plaintiff** – a person who brings a suit to court.
- **Fourteenth Amendment** – ratified in 1868, granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States—including formerly enslaved people—and guaranteed all persons “equal protection of the laws.”
- **Precedent** – a court decision that is considered an authority and influences future decisions.
- **Massive resistance** – the widespread opposition of many white southerners to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).
- **Pupil placement laws** – laws used in Southern states to avoid desegregation by assigning individual students to the schools deemed appropriate for them and requiring a long and complicated process to request transfer to a different school.
- **Citizens’ Councils** – organizations formed to counter desegregation.
- **Southern Manifesto** – A document signed in 1956 by the overwhelming majority of southern congressmen and senators that condemned the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

Discussion Questions

- Why was Topeka a surprising place for *Brown v. Board of Education* to originate?
- Why did the Topeka NAACP challenge Kansas’s elementary school segregation law if the schools were relatively equal in quality?
- What do you think Linda meant when she said that after *Brown* she and her family “lived in the calm of the hurricane’s eye”? Explain.
- How did Linda advocate for civil rights after *Brown*?

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