



Dovey Mae Johnson Roundtree

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One Child Can Change the World

by Victoria Johnson

There is always someone, I am convinced, who would be the miracle maker in your life, if you believe. One story cannot change the world, but one child can.

James Johnson, a printer and Sunday school teacher, and his wife Lela, a seamstress and domestic worker, welcomed their second daughter into the world on April 14, 1917, in North Carolina. A family of strong faith surrounded Dovey Mae, as her folks affectionately called her. At two months old she was baptized at East Stonewall A.M.E. Zion Church, a church her grandfather pastored.

When Dovey Mae was the tender age of four, her father died and her mother and three sisters moved into their grandparents' home. Rachel Bryant Graham, her grandmother, had only a third grade education but she stood as a firm pillar for her family and in her community. She led out each Sunday walking to church on the arm of her pastor husband singing, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine." Dovey Mae's family followed her grandmother and then each family from the neighborhood followed behind. Rachel Graham expected all of her granddaughters to be educated and do well. Besides her words of encouragement she was known to pray constantly for her family. Mrs. Graham's faith in God, love and care for her family, and willingness to help people was obvious and contagious. Dovey Mae caught it all.

God opened the door for Dovey Mae to attend Spellman College in Atlanta. In spite of several obstacles she graduated in 1938. She taught school briefly in South Carolina but wanted to be more of a financial help to her family and decided to move to Washington, D.C., where she worked for Mary McLeod Bethune, a friend of her grandmother. Bethune persuaded Dovey Mae to be one of the initial 40 black women to join the Women's Army Corps (WAC) in World War II, and she traveled the South recruiting black women for the service even as she was evicted from a Miami bus and forced to give up her seat to a white Marine.

After the war Dovey Mae worked with black labor leader A. Philip Randolph to promote equality in hiring practices. During this time she married Bill Roundtree, but the marriage ended in divorce after he realized he did not share his wife's views and passion. Around the same time, she met a lawyer who helped her understand important social change happens through law. She enrolled in the Howard University School of Law on her GI Bill. She studied diligently and won the respect of her fellow male lawyers and professors. She researched for Thurgood Marshall as he and others fought and won the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case.

After graduating from Howard, Roundtree, along with her law partner and mentor Julius Robertson,

took a bus desegregation case in 1955 to the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC)—*Sarah Keys v. Carolina Coach Company*. Keys, a WAC, had been forced (like Roundtree) to give up her bus seat to a white Marine in 1942. Roundtree won the case, but the ICC did not fully enforce desegregation until the Freedom Riders challenged segregated transportation in 1961.

Black lawyers were not respected in Roundtree's day—they had to leave courthouses to go to segregated bathrooms elsewhere. However, she and her partner won multiple cases for black clients before white judges and juries, including that of a poor black man accused of murdering a white society woman. In 1963, Dovey Mae broke another barrier when she was admitted into the all-white Women's Bar Association in D.C.

Roundtree has described herself as a Christian lawyer, open and available to God and willing to help all people. She has kept her home open to children or teens in need of a place to stay.

Her life has had many challenges. She has struggled with diabetes and in 1960 threatened to quit law after the sudden death of her first law partner, followed by the death of her beloved grandmother. Nevertheless she opened a new law office in Washington and hired three additional lawyers. As she said, "If you wish to do, God will somehow make a way for you."

Shortly before her first partner's death, Roundtree found herself battling a spiritual restlessness. She blurted out to a visiting minister friend, Rev. Green, "What would you say if I told you I wanted to become a minister?" He affirmed her calling and suggested she speak with the Howard Divinity School staff. She broke down another barrier in 1961 when she became one of the first ordained female ministers in the A.M.E church.

Dovey Mae summed up her personal statement of faith, "I profoundly believe in the resurrection story and what it promises. I've seen a cremated body. It's hardly a teacup. But there's more to me than that. There's more to you than that. And so I believe—you ask me how I believe. I know not how I believe, but something in my soul convinces me that life is not mocked and that I shall see God and see Jesus for myself."

In her senior years she initiated a campaign tackling the black family crisis from the perspective of a lawyer and minister. She speaks out for the cause of children and families. "It is our business to save our children," she says, "and that has nothing to do with whether you're black, white, brown, yellow, whatever you are...you can't make the next generation unless we make the children."

Roundtree gives us her story with coauthor Katie McCabe in *Justice Older than the Law*. This book captures Roundtree's gratitude for all the people who helped her throughout her life and her challenge to the current generation to make a difference for the next.



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