

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Ralph J. Bunche

(August 7, 1904 - December 9, 1971)

“First Black Nobel Peace Prize Winner”



Ralph J. Bunche was born in Detroit, Michigan on August 7, 1904, to Fred and Olive Bunche. He lived with his father, a barber that catered to a white-only clientele, and his musician mother. The family shared the home with his mixed-race, white passing, grandmother, who had been born into slavery.

When Ralph was ten years old, his family moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in hopes of the dry air helping his parent's declining health. After their death, Ralph and his two sisters went to live in Los Angeles, CA., with their grandmother. Ralph earned money by selling newspapers, helping on work sites, and, at one point, appearing as a house boy on a movie set.



In school, Ralph was a brilliant student, who excelled in all areas of study. He received awards and recognition in History, English, Debate class and was the valedictorian of his high school class. In addition to being a top student, Ralph was also a talented athlete who excelled in football, baseball, basketball, and track. His athletic prowess earned him an athletic scholarship to the University of California. He graduated as valedictorian, summa cum laude, with a degree in international relations, in 1927.



Ralph received a scholarship from Harvard and a gift of \$1000 raised by the black community in Los Angeles. He completed his masters in 1928 and worked for the next six years on his doctorate - all while teaching at Howard University in Washington DC. Ralph became the first African American to be awarded a PhD in Government and International Relations from Harvard.

Over the next ten years, Ralph traveled to Africa for research on his prize-winning dissertation: he received multiple awards and accolades. Ralph completed some post graduate work in anthropology at Northwestern and at the London School of Economics. He even studied at the University of Cape Town in apartheid South Africa. He served as an Expert on African affairs at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference in 1944 - which led to the formation of the United Nations. Subsequently, he participated in the historic San Francisco Conference in 1945, where the charter of the UN was drafted. In 1946, UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie asked Ralph to lead the UN's Department of Trusteeship, which took care of problems between nations that had not yet achieved self-government. He would be associated with the United Nations for the rest of his life. Between 1947 and 1949, Ralph worked on the most important assignment of his career - brokering a peace in Palestine. In June 1948, the UN appointed Count Folke Bernadotte as mediator and Ralph Bunche as his chief aide. On September 17, 1948, Count Bernadotte was assassinated, and Ralph was named acting UN mediator on Palestine. He spent the next 11 months tirelessly brokering a peace treaty, finally getting an armistice between Israel and Egypt, followed by one between Israel/Jordan, and Syria/Lebanon.

Ralph returned home a hero, with a ticker-tape parade and a day named in his honor. He was awarded the Spingarn Award by the NAACP in 1949 and received over 30 honorary degrees over the next 30 years. In 1950, Ralph Bunche was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1956, he supervised the deployment of 6,000 United Nations peacekeeping troops around the Suez Canal to defuse the crisis initiated by the attack upon Egypt. In the 1960s, he led UN peacekeeping missions in the Congo and Cyprus. He became Under Secretary General of the United Nations in 1968.

Although he was able to negotiate international peace deals, Ralph was still fighting for his own basic civil rights back in the United States. Even with his impressive resume, and Nobel Peace Prize, Ralph could not get a first-class hotel room in Washington DC, or sit in the front of the bus in Mobile, Alabama. He was not welcome at a Woolworth's lunch counter and could not sit downstairs in a movie theater anywhere in the South. He would not have been able to enroll his children in a white school in many parts of the country. For all his importance at the UN, he couldn't rent in the East Side Manhattan neighborhoods surrounding the United Nations complex.



Ralph joined Martin Luther King's March on Washington in 1963 and the subsequent marches in Montgomery and Selma, Alabama.

Ralph used his Nobel Peace Prize money to buy a home in Jamaica, NY., where he lived until his death on December 9, 1971. Today, there are elementary and high schools across the country named after him. His alma mater, UCLA, named a building Bunche Hall, after him, with a statue at the entrance. The Library of the US Department of State, the oldest Federal government library (founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1789) was renamed in 1997. It is now the Ralph J. Bunche Library.

