

Ruth Acty - Brief Biography

Ruth Acty was born in Oakland, California on July 13, 1913 to John and Gussie (née Stokes) Acty. She was raised in West Oakland and attended McClymonds High School, where she was inspired by the example of Ida Louise Jackson, the first Black teacher in Oakland. Ruth Acty earned a BA in English, with Music Minor from San Francisco State in 1937, and studied early childhood development and speech at the University of California, Berkeley. Despite earning multiple teaching credentials, she could not find a teaching job when she first sought employment in 1939, including in Berkeley, where there were no teachers of color.

Eventually, Ruth Acty found a job teaching in Southern California, in El Centro. Meanwhile, back in Berkeley, dedicated activists lead by Frances Albrier put pressure on the Berkeley School Board to integrate the teaching force. Albrier noted that there were 5,000 taxpaying Black citizens in Berkeley, and they were not represented by even one Black teacher. Finally, under the leadership of pediatrician Dr. Louise Hector as School Board chair, the district's hiring policy was changed so that teachers would be hired based on merit and without regard to race. Superintendent of Schools Virgil E. Dickson meanwhile strategized to ensure that the Longfellow Elementary School staff and community would accept the first Black teacher. Dr. Dickson offered Ruth Acty a job teaching Kindergarten, with the theory that the children of that age would be less prejudiced, and since Kindergarten was optional, parents who objected could withdraw. She accepted, knowing what this meant for the fight to integrate the teaching force.

Ruth Acty excelled in her teaching assignment, and paved the way for the next Black teacher to be hired. She was then sent to teach Kindergarten at Lincoln (now Malcolm X), and later in 1955 she became the first Black teacher at the secondary school level in Berkeley, at Burbank Jr. High. She taught junior high school for 20 years, including at Garfield (now Martin Luther King Middle School). Along the way she continued to expand her own education, including earning a Master's Degree in Theatre at Northwestern, and studying French at the Monterey Institute of Foreign Studies and during a sabbatical in France in 1968. Acty officially retired in 1985, but continued teaching English as a Foreign Language and other courses at the Berkeley Adult School, until finally resigning in 1991 at the age of 78. She passed away on July 28, 1998.

Honors and Recognitions - Partial List

- 1982: Board of Education issued a Resolution of Appreciation for Ruth Acty
- 1985: Profile of Ruth Acty published by East Bay Times and the Berkeley Alumni Association
- 1986: City of Berkeley proclaimed October 5, 1986 "Ruth Acty Day."
- 1991: CSU-Hayward historian produced a video about Ruth Acty, entitled "Born to Teach."
- 1994: Berkeley Historical Society recorded Ruth Acty for oral history
- 1998: Board of Education issued a posthumous Recognition Resolution for Ruth Acty.
- 2001: Berkeley Historical Society published "Ruth Acty: First African American Teacher in the Berkeley Unified School District," with a transcript of the oral history, and many articles and tributes, including the suggestion that a school facility be renamed in her honor.