

About Shirley Bulah

Unlike white students who could ride a school bus, Shirley Bulah walked a long distance each day to the Hockessin Colored Elementary School. Her mother, Sarah Bulah, asked for bus service for her daughter. Her request was turned down.

Mrs. Bulah did not accept this decision. After several refusals, she went to see Louis Redding. He did not want to sue the school district for a "Jim Crow school bus" to take Shirley Bulah to a "Jim Crow school." Seeing an opportunity to challenge the status quo, Redding persuaded Mrs. Bulah to sue to have her daughter admitted to the white school.

[New York Times obituary, June 4, 2003—from online version](#)

Shirley B. Stamps Dies at 59; Won '54 Desegregation Case

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The Rev. Shirley Bulah Stamps, whose parents' fight for her to ride a school bus became part of the 1954 Supreme Court case that ended school segregation, died on Wednesday in Wilmington, Del. She was 59.

The cause was a heart attack, The Associated Press reported.

Shirley Bulah was 8 when her parents, Fred and Sarah, grew tired of driving her two miles to a black school in Hockessin, Del., a suburb of Wilmington. Each day, a bus went right by their home on its way to a far better white school.

In 1951, with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Bulahs sued not just for a bus ride; they also asked a state court for admission to the white school.

They won, and for the first time, a segregated white public school was ordered by an American court to admit black children. Thurgood Marshall, then director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, called it "the first real victory in our campaign to destroy segregation."

After the decision was upheld by the Delaware Supreme Court, an appeal by the state board of education reached the United States Supreme Court, as part of a bundle of cases from Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, the District of Columbia and Delaware. Together the cases became known as Oliver L.

Brown, et al., v. the Board of Education of Topeka. The Delaware case was unique in that all the other state courts had upheld segregation.

The decision of the court was unanimous in ending school segregation in the United States. The opinion, written by Chief Justice Earl Warren, repeatedly cited the reasoning and language of Collins Jacques Seitz, the Delaware judge who presided over the Bulahs' case.

Shirley was adopted by the Bulahs after Sarah Bulah read in the Wilmington newspapers in 1945 about an abandoned 10-month-old baby, according to Richard Kluger in his book, "Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality" (Knopf, 1976). Her husband, who worked as a foreman in a paper mill, had eight children, four of whom survived into adulthood, from his first marriage, but Mrs. Bulah was in her 50's and childless.

When Mrs. Bulah wrote to state education authorities to complain about the lack of a bus for her child, she was eventually told that the state constitution required racially segregated educational facilities and that buses fell under that definition.

Mrs. Bulah went to Louis L. Redding, a lawyer for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the first black admitted to the Delaware bar.

"He said he wouldn't help me get a Jim Crow bus to take my girl to any Jim Crow school," Mrs. Bulah told Mr. Kluger, "but if I was interested in sendin' her to an integrated school, why, then maybe he'd help. Well, I thanked God right then and there."

Mr. Kluger wrote that many blacks in the area were upset with the legal action because they had no desire to associate with white people. But Shirley was welcomed by her new white classmates.

"They came to my birthday parties at my house, and I went to theirs," she said in an interview with The News Journal of Wilmington in April. "I didn't have to worry about being punched or worry about getting gum in my hair."

After graduating from high school, the News Journal reported, she was a nurse in the military, where she met Phillip E. Stamps. They married, and when he retired they moved to Maryland. He died in 1996 and she moved back to Delaware.

She was ordained as a minister in 1984 and was pastor of four churches, the last the St. James African Union Methodist Church in Wilmington.

She is survived by her son, Phillip Jr., of Baltimore, and three grandchildren.

