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Butterfly Effects From the Life of a Little Girl: A Book Review Essay of
*Equal Justice: The Courage of Ada Sipuel*
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Law students are usually introduced to Ada Lois Sipuel in the context of several pre-
*Brown v. Board of Education* cases decided by the United States Supreme Court. In these cases:

State of Missouri ex rel Canada v. Gaines,1 Sipuel v. Board of Regents of University of
Oklahoma,2 McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education3 and Sweatt v. Painter,4
the Court preserves the separate but equal world of *Plessy v. Ferguson*,5 but so carefully narrows

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1305 U. S. 337 (1938). State of Missouri constitutional and statutory law required separate education for African Americans and whites. Represented by Charles Hamilton Houston, Lloyd Gaines sought admission to the University of Missouri Law School even though the state was willing to pay for Gaines to attend law school at an adjacent state. The United States Supreme Court declared that Gaines right was a “personal one.” *Id* at 351. The “state was bound to furnish him within its borders facilities for legal education substantially equal to those which the State there afforded for persons of the white race, whether or not other negroes sought the same opportunity.” *Id* at 351.

2332 U. S. 631 (1948). Ada Lois Sipuel applied to the University of Oklahoma School of Law and was denied admission because she was African American. In compliance with the State of Oklahoma law requiring segregation, the Oklahoma State Supreme Court denied her writ of mandamus stating that she had not requested the state’s historically black college, Langston University to create a law school for her. Accordingly, the state could not be liable for violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Sipuel v. Board of Regents of University of Oklahoma, 199 Okla. 36, 39-40 (1947). The United States Supreme Court ordered that Oklahoma provide Sipuel with a law school education” as soon as it [did] for applicants of any other group.” Sipuel v. Board of Regents of University of Oklahoma, 332 U. S. 631 (1948).

3339 U. S. 637 (1950). After admitting George McLaurin to the graduate school at the University of Oklahoma, the university required him to “sit apart at a designated desk in an anteroom adjoining the classroom; to sit at a designated desk on the mezzanine floor of the library, but not to use the desks in the regular reading room; and to sit at a designated table and to eat at a different time from the other students in the school cafeteria.” *Id* at 640. The United States Supreme Court held that the differential treatment violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Id* at 642.

4339 U. S. 629 (1950). Hemann Marion Sweatt sought admission to the University of Texas Law School and his admission was denied pursuant to Texas state constitutional law that required separation of the races in education. Sweatt v. Painter, 210 S. W. 2d 442 (1948). Thereafter, a separate law school was created at Texas Southern University, the historically black college. Sweatt refused to apply for admission to the TSU Law School. The United States Supreme Court did not overrule *Plessy v. Ferguson*, but instead stated: “Fourteenth Amendment requires that petitioner be admitted to the University of Texas School” because of the lack of compliance with the “substantial equality” requirement of *Plessy*. *Id* at 632-33.

5163 U. S. 537 (1896). The “separate but equal doctrine” popularly characterizes the United States Supreme Court opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The opinion never actually cited this doctrine but instead said: “The object of the [fourteenth] amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things, it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality for commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either.” *Plessy
the constitutional discussion and choice of remedies that by 1954, the Court could only declare
that separate educational facilities were “inherrently unequal” in Brown v. Board of Education I.6

Equal Justice: The Courage of Ada Sipuel introduces us to her differently. We still know her
intimately—not as Miss Sipuel or Mrs. Ada Fisher once she married—we know her personally and
always as Ada Lois Sipuel—the first African American woman to attend the University of
Oklahoma College of Law. She is one of those African American women with three names that
designate her fame.7 Although she was a storm trooper in that first wave of higher education
admissions cases and a contemporary of others we have come to know similarly - Lloyd Gaines,
George McLaurin and Hemann Marion Sweatt - Ada Lois Sipuel is presented to us as a child in
Equal Justice: The Courage of Ada Sipuel. It is that voice we hear in the book and the young
reader is the book’s intended audience.

Bernhardt and Henry’s biography of Ada Lois Sipuel for young readers reminds us that
she was once just a little girl. In so reminding us, the book unfolds and reveals the butterfly
effects of her childhood as well as those greater effects that one life could have on the movement
for equal educational opportunity under the law. Ada Lois Sipuel’s voice is heard across twelve
short chapters of very accessible reading for the young reader. The author’s notes suggest that
some details of her life and some conversations between characters were fictionalized in order to
bring Ada’s story to life for her audience.8 Many themes peculiar to the experience of a child
growing up in Jim Crow America are presented in a manner that will allow a contemporary

6347 U. S. 483, 495 (1954). The Court instructed that states should provide educational opportunities to children
equally without regard to race. Id at 492 (stating that “where the state has undertaken to provide [public education] ,
it is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.”) Id at 492. According to Brown “[s]eparate but
equal” has no place in public education. Id at 495.

7Many people have middle names but in the African American community when you are “called” by your full name
it is often a particular term of endearment or respect suggesting that you are held in high regard. Ada Lois Sipuel is
in the company of many other African American women who are similarly known: Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary
McLeod Bethune, Zora Neale Hurston, Constance Baker Motley, Ida Bell Wells-Barnett, Mary Frances Berry and
the list goes on.

young reader to identify with the young Ada Lois’ struggles.

Ada’s struggles were racialized and very harsh. Throughout the historical account of her youthful struggles, her father’s words were her mantra: “If something’s worth having, it’s worth fighting for.” As a young girl, she struggled to find her place in a segregated world and the proxy for that struggle was presented early in the book with the depiction of a fight she had with a young white girl who ordered her to “go back to where [she] belonged.” Where did a “stringy-haired, tall skinny, sallow-faced negress” who would one day be the first, and at the time, the only female and only African American in the freshman class of the University of Oklahoma College of Law belong? The young Ada Lois was a very smart, accomplished student in a school environment that was not prepared to complement her abilities. The

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facilities and equipment were inadequate and the books were outdated. In Oklahoma, the separate requirement of the *Plessy* formula was met by the state, however, the equality requirement was sorely lacking.\(^{12}\) Jim Crow America required her parents to solidly ground and support her in defining who she was as an individual when all signs, both literal and figurative, said “whites only.”\(^{13}\)

Other themes and values emphasized by the historical accounting of Ada Lois Sipuel’s childhood are those of family unity and dedication to the service of others. Her entire family worked together to fight for something bigger than themselves. They became an important part of the Civil Rights Movement locally in Oklahoma, and nationally with Ada Lois Sipuel’s lawsuit against the University of Oklahoma.

Finally, the notion of the butterfly effects—those subtle ways individuals touch and render help across time and space to others never knowing how widely those effects may be felt was best explained by Thurgood Marshall to Ada Lois Sipuel the day she graduated from law school. He explained that Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) had been very instrumental in helping Warren McGuinn, the first African American to attend Yale Law School.\(^{14}\) McGuinn in turn had been very helpful to Thurgood Marshall in establishing his legal career with the proviso that Marshall “use [his talent] not just to make money, but to do some good in the world.”\(^{15}\) Marshall helped Sipuel who in turn influenced the parents of Linda Brown–another little girl whose voice advanced the Civil Rights Movement.\(^{16}\)

\(^{12}\) OKLA. CONST. OF 1907, art. XIII, § 3: “[s]eparate schools for white and colored children with like accommodation shall be provided by the Legislature and impartially maintained.”

\(^{13}\) WILLIAM BERNHARDT & KIM HENRY, EQUAL JUSTICE: THE COURAGE OF ADA SIPUEL 10 (2006). Indeed, the sign that Ada had fought the young white girl about read “WHITES ONLY,” however, her mother instructed that the other side of the sign was blank and she could “write whatever [she wanted] on it” *Id* at 11.


Ada Lois Sipuel’s voice reminds us of the voices of other children who impacted the Civil Rights Movement. The voices of Emmett Till\(^7\) and those of four little girls: Carole Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carol Robertson were strong even though silenced early.\(^8\) Like these young voices that came after hers, Ada Lois Sipuel’s voice tells the young reader that children can endure and persevere. Children can be brave and courageous. Children can be resilient. Children can be heroes.

\(^7\)See STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD, A DEATH IN THE DELTA: THE STORY OF EMMETT TILL (1988). Emmett Till was a young African American Chicagoan visiting relatives in Mississippi during the summer of 1955. He was 14 years old that summer when he was kidnapped and lynched in August, 1955 for the offense of whistling at a white woman. *Id* at 15-31.

\(^8\)See FRANK SIKORA, UNTIL JUSTICE ROLLS DOWN: THE BIRMINGHAM CHURCH BOMBING CASE 3-14 (1991); ELIZABETH H. COBBS & PETRIC J. SMITH, LONG TIME COMING: AN INSIDER’S STORY OF THE BIRMINGHAM CHURCH BOMBING THAT ROCKED THE WORLD 93-94 (1994). Carole Denise McNair (11), Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), and Carol Robertson (14) were killed on September 15, 1963 in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama. *Id*. 