

Clara Luper:  
Mother of Oklahoma's Civil Rights

Simhao Low  
Individual Website  
Junior Division

Clara Luper, leader of the Oklahoma Sit-In Movement. Her name does not resonate throughout the nation like Rosa Parks' and her sit-ins not as widely recognized as the Greensboro sit-ins. The reason I chose Clara Luper and her legacy as my topic is because I would like to raise awareness about how education and peaceful activism propelled the battle against racism.

Since the origins of my topic occurred in Oklahoma, most of my research was personally gathered. I was able to interview people who knew Clara Luper personally. I attended the screening of the documentary, 'Children of the Civil Rights' at the Oklahoma History Center and participated in a panel discussion with Clara Luper's daughter, Marilyn Luper-Hildreth, and several of her former students like Portwood Williams Jr, Stanley Evans, and Joyce Henderson. I recorded the panel board interview and personally interviewed the three former students. The research and analysis done for this project was beyond reading a book. I had face-to-face opportunities that gave me a deeper understanding of how Clara Luper and her students championed the cause that changed America to how it is today. In addition to personal interviews, I acquired an audio interview with I.G Purser, the lieutenant in charge of the sit-ins, through the Oklahoma History Center. I also trimmed television footages of John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Address and Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act.

Choosing between a documentary or a website as a project platform was a struggle. Because of the extensive media I have procured, a paper and gallery board or an individual performance would not allow me to present my topic in its entirety. I worked with websites in the past two years and I would like to use a website this year because with my experience, I believe I could create a better project.

Clara Luper and the Oklahoma Sit-In Movement left a great legacy behind. More than a hundred establishments in Oklahoma were desegregated, and some chains integrated out of state. Clara Luper inspired her students to stand up for their rights. By being a great teacher and motivator, she awakened the fervor of citizenship among young people. Her former students said Clara was a dedicated teacher with very high standards of excellence. She implemented strict discipline and constantly encouraged students to improve. According to Portwood Williams Jr, all the sit-in participants ended up graduating with a Masters' degree or more. Barbara Posey is an activist until now. Joyce Henderson became a teacher and a school principal. Stanley Evans was Assistant Dean of the University of Oklahoma's Law School until he retired.

Clara Luper's most significant legacy was that she inspired and motivated her students to embrace the opportunity of changing the course of history. She turned education into a shared learning experience between a teacher and her students, so that they could overcome challenges and become the best that they could be. Clara Luper was a teacher activist in a class of her own.