



**Vel Phillips, Wisconsin Judge, Secretary of State, Trailblazer
(February 18, 1923 – April 17, 2018)**

Velvlea Rodgers "Vel" Phillips was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on February 18, 1923. She graduated from North Division High School and went on to get her Bachelor of Arts degree from Howard University in 1946. Returning home to Milwaukee after her graduation, she married (Warren) Dale Phillips, and joined him to attend the University of Wisconsin Law School. She earned her law degree in 1951, becoming the first African-American woman to do so.

Vel Phillips went on to become a woman of many more firsts. With her husband, Dale, they became the first husband and wife partnership admitted to practice law in the United States Eastern District of Wisconsin. Elected in 1956 as the first female and first African American on the Milwaukee Common Council, Phillips sponsored legislation to outlaw racial discrimination in city housing ordinances. Success took six years of political tumult and 200 days of marches and nonviolent community protests, but she was eventually recognized nationally for her leadership.



In 1971, Phillips left her role as "Madam Alderman" when she was appointed to Milwaukee County Circuit Court becoming the first female judge in Milwaukee County and the first African-American judge in Wisconsin. In 1978, she was the first woman and first African American to be elected as Wisconsin's secretary of state.

As the first woman and first African American to ascend to major political posts in Wisconsin, Phillips said she found that her gender presented more roadblocks than her race. "But once you're there, [white people] will realize you're just like everybody else," Phillips explained to Milwaukee Magazine. "But the men never forget that you are a woman. Never, ever, ever."

As law students, the Phillipses were assigned to housing where neighboring students soon petitioned to bar future black residents. The couple found another UW community that was more welcoming to them and their two

sons, but Vel remained deeply affected by the experience. Inspired by advice from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall to use her profession to make the world better, she would go on to win a historic fight for fair housing and social justice.

Today her voice is amplified through the Vel Phillips Foundation. On the UW–Madison campus, a lakeshore dorm now bears the name, “Phillips Hall,” an honor the namesake said she couldn’t think about too often. “I just try not to think of it as anything special,” she said, “because I couldn’t have done it alone.” Vel Phillips passed away in April 2018 at 94 years old.

Sources:

<https://www.waalawyers.com/Foundation.aspx>

https://www.uwalumni.com/news_release/remembering-vel-phillips/

<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4384>