

# 2022 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History Student Creative Expressions Contest

Northern Regional Winning Submission

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Growing up in South Africa, I learned about many inspirational men and women who fought against the oppression of Apartheid and for basic human rights. Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Lillian Ngoyi, Winnie Mandela - all black men and women who I looked up to. However, when I moved to America, I was shocked that so few African Americans, especially women, were named in my history and science lessons. I wondered why the women who fought in the civil rights movement were not common household names. Why the African American women who contributed to science were brushed to the wayside. Why is it that so many women from history have had their voices silenced? It still shocks me that so few of them, especially those of color, were never acknowledged for their achievements; that so few women were given the chance to do so. This is why, whenever I hear about a woman who has not been given the recognition they deserve, I am determined to share their story.

Gladys B. West is an inspirational African American woman who went against the odds and developed significant achievements in the field of science and mathematics. She was an integral part of the development of the GPS, which we use for everything from navigation to sharing our location on social media. She tirelessly collected data and did mathematical equations, and her accomplishments are made even more impressive given that she was an African American woman facing harsh prejudice in the midst of the civil rights movement. Like the anti-apartheid heroes I learned about in South Africa, she faced discrimination based on her skin color, and had to work twice as hard as any white man to gain even a small amount of respect for her work.

For too long, Gladys West was not given the recognition for her work that she deserved, and it was only recently that her contributions to society were made known. She is an extraordinary role model, proving that with enough determination, anyone can go against the odds and achieve something incredible. As a woman who wants to work in a scientific field to help change and improve society as well, learning about Gladys West has been a great inspiration. Whenever I start to doubt myself, I think of what she was able to do when she wasn't in as good a position as I am.

It's a grave injustice that many women of the past were never recognized for their achievements, but Gladys West's story gives me hope that more women, and more African Americans, will be acknowledged from now on. It gives me hope that more people who were once pushed to the side, can become role models to the next generation. That we can overcome the prejudice that has plagued society for so long. That anyone, no matter their gender, culture, or skin color, can be given the opportunity to achieve their dreams and make their worlds a better place.