

Gerald E. Talbot

Gerald E. Talbot is originally from Bangor, Maine. He was a soldier and a legislator, and is a father and a husband and an important civil rights leader in Portland. His role in the community has helped the city over the years. Today Mr. Talbot is still giving lectures about what we can do to improve the community, and lives with his wife Mrs. Anita Talbot in Portland, Maine.

“There comes a time when you have to challenge society. Whether it’s City Hall, or whoever that is, you have to challenge them. And make sure you’ve got a voice. Make sure society knows you have that voice. And if you use that voice, you can be heard.”

Gerald E. Talbot was born in 1931 and raised in Bangor, Maine. At the time he wasn’t thinking about the fact that he would become one of the most well known men in Portland. Mr. Talbot joined the armed services after he married his wife, Anita Cummings. He was shipped off from Fort Devens, Massachusetts, to Thule, Greenland, now known as Qaanaaq. Thule is a place that is by the North Pole. He spent quite a while there, and when he got back he retired from the army. He moved to Portland to find a better life with his wife.

May 11, 1964, is a date Mr. Talbot will never forget. Around Portland it was hard for a person of color to get a job. “We needed to have a meeting, because things just ain’t working out,” exclaimed Mr. Talbot. “We can’t find a job, we can’t find housing, we can’t get... you know... education. When things ain’t working out, we need to do something about that.” So when he came to the church, where an important meeting took place, he understood the needs of the community. At the meeting the people were going to choose a person to be president of the Portland Branch of the NAACP. He had no idea what was to come. They took the vote, and none other than Gerald E. Talbot

became the new president of the Portland Branch. “I wasn’t really aware of the fact that I was going to become president of the NAACP,” he stated after recalling the event. “I probably had some idea, but I was surprised when it was me who was chosen for the job.”

Civil rights protests did not start until people got the word about the NAACP out around town. Mr. Talbot talked about what his responsibility was as a leader. “I think my major responsibility,” he said, “was that we were alive and well, that we *were* a voice in the community.” He says there were many marches held, and the events started rolling.

The presence of the KKK was subtle in Portland, but one day, on his way to work, Mr. Talbot passed a parking lot. When he looked over, he had to look again. The KKK was marching in the parking lot. Before he realized what he was doing, he swerved his car into the parking lot. One of the men saw him, and came over to investigate. Anger took control of Mr. Talbot. He got out of his car and stormed over to the man walking toward him. “Before I realized what I did, I ripped off his hood. Big, bushy red hair and he was upset... ain’t too happy with what I did,” he said. “I was

Small Acts of Courage

saying, 'What are you doing?! Comin' over here, into Portland!'" Obviously, he was upset when the event happened, but now he thinks of it as a comical memory.

Discrimination played a larger role in Portland than you might imagine. It was hard for people of color to get jobs around town. Gerald E. Talbot, for one, has very light skin, and people would often ask him what race he actually was. He would start out with a good job for a while, but after they found out, things got a little shaky. "When they found out who I am, suddenly I didn't have a job anymore." He found this very frustrating, as did many other citizens of that time. "One of the things my father told me was that you always have to find a trade... something you can get a job at." But jobs weren't the only things the Talbot's had problems with. Housing discrimination was a problem too. Since his wife had even darker skin than he, it was hard to find a house. But the Fair Housing Act made it easier for people to get a home.

The Fair Housing Act was one of many bills made into law. "Fair housing was one of the biggest problems in Portland, and in the state of Maine. If you were black, it was even harder to find an apartment," he said. Life was hard, but he could help others who had the same problem as he. One time he got kicked out of an apartment by the landlord. The landlord said that he was renting it out to another person. But Mr. Talbot watched, and no one was moving in. He and another man both were refused, and so they brought the man to court. They won the case, and the landlord was fined 50 dollars, but could still rent out his apartments. This left Mr. Talbot slightly agitated, but knowing he had made a small difference.

Mr. Talbot loves to help others and is involved in his community. He claims to have "been on everybody's board" around town. He would get letters and invitations from a variety of people. Yet he would look at the list of names on them and there would be no names of black people. So he would either call the people who

sent them, or march right up and ask them in person, "How many black members do you *have*?" Usually they had none.

All in all, Gerald E. Talbot has played many important roles throughout his life. He was a soldier in the army, a husband and a father. He has been a Maine legislator. He also has been president of the Portland Branch of the NAACP, making the lives of others more meaningful. He enjoys helping others. "There comes a time when you have to challenge society, whether it's City Hall, or whoever that is, you have to challenge them. And like I said before, make sure you've got a voice. Make sure society knows you have a voice. And if you use that voice, you can be heard."

-- by Sasha L.

