



Hello. My name is Nora Pfeiffer, and I am the Franciscan Justice Circles Director here at Franciscan Action Network. I invite you to listen to this story of Joan Trumpauer Mulholland and reflect on her determination to act in accordance with Gospel teaching, no matter how much resistance she faced.

If you are white and come to understand the harm caused by racism in the systems and culture around you, how do you respond?

Joan Trumpauer Mulholland was born in 1941 and raised in Arlington, Virginia, by her father from Iowa and her mother from Georgia whose grandparents had been slave owners. On a summer visit to see her grandmother in Georgia when she was 10 years old, Joan and another white friend dared each other to cross the train tracks into the side of town where Black people lived. As a child herself, Joan saw with her own eyes the stark difference between the condition of the one-room school for black children, with no electricity, running water, windows or playground equipment and the pristine fully equipped brick school for white children just down the road. Witnessing the disparity she encountered was a turning point in her life.

Back in Virginia, Joan's family regularly attended a Presbyterian church and as a teenager, she continued to question segregation and "knowing the hypocrisy of it from what our founding documents and the Bible [said], I just sort of felt, as a Southerner, that we needed to change. And when I had my chance to help do something, I would seize it." ¹

¹ (Mulholland, J. T., Dittmer, J. & Civil Rights History Project, U. S. (2013) Joan Trumpauer Mulholland oral history interview conducted by John Dittmer in Arlington, Virginia. [Video] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, [https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669178/.](https://www.loc.gov/item/2015669178/))

The opportunity to leave her parents' house and attend college was her chance. As a freshman at Duke University, Joan and some other students began joining Black students from North Carolina College in protests against segregation and she was arrested twice. After being pressured by the dean to quit her activism and after completing the year, Joan withdrew from Duke and supported herself in Washington DC working and volunteering with activist organizations. It was then that she started participating in sit-ins and demonstrations at lunch counters, joining more than 50 actions all before she turned 23 years old. While actively resisting systematic racism all around her, Joan applied and was accepted at Tougaloo College, a historically Black school in Mississippi, where she studied history.

Among the many actions she took, Joan became a Freedom Rider, a participant in the 1963 Jackson Woolworth's Sit-in, the March on Washington, the Meredith March and the Selma to Montgomery March. For her decisions and actions she was disowned by her family, attacked, shot at, cursed at, hunted down by the Klan for execution, and incarcerated in the Mississippi State Penitentiary's death row block along with other Freedom Riders under the governor's orders for over two months. All because she recognized an injustice and did what she was able to do to resist and call for change. In her reflections on why it mattered so much to her even at a young age, she points to her faith, "We are all created in the image of the Almighty. If you disrespect someone because of what they look like, you are disrespecting the Almighty. One day, we will all meet again on the other side."²

Joan Trumpauer Mulholland remains committed to education on anti-racism and shares these inspiring words: "Anyone can make a difference. It doesn't matter how old or young you are. Find a problem, get some friends together, and go fix it. Remember, you don't have to change the world . . . just change your world."

² [Joan Mulholland Was at the Most Important Moments of Civil Rights History](#), By Jill S. Devine May 27, 2022