

VEL PHILLIPS

DREAM BIG DREAMS

ON TELEVISION
ON THE WEB AND
IN YOUR COMMUNITY

WPT.ORG/VELPHILLIPS



Hosting a Vel Phillips: Dream Big Dreams Event

What are your big dreams for your community? What issues seem to be unsolvable? If you could change one thing about your community, what would it be?

Thank you for hosting a screening event as part of the Vel Phillips: Dream Big Dreams project.

This project celebrates the life of Vel Phillips: activist, politician, mother, wife, community leader. Her life's work has been focused on issues of equity and fairness, on ensuring that all people have access to education, housing, and more.

One person can make a big difference. We challenge you to join Ms. Phillips and help make the world just a little better, one community at a time. This kit will help you organize a screening event and discussion session, and connect your event and ideas to a larger community also hosting similar events around the state.

How to host an event

1. Pick a date and location
2. Invite a group of people to your event
3. Watch the documentary (from the DVD or watch on wpt.org/velphillips)
4. Use the questions and activities in this guide as a conversation starter with your group
5. After your event, complete and return a feedback card or email dreambigdreams@wpt.org and let us know:
 - a. Your name
 - b. Your event date
 - c. What kind of group you hosted (eg family viewing, book club, church group, etc)
 - d. How many people attended
6. What was your group's big idea(s) related to issues of equity and race for your community?
7. If you have an engagement kit, please pass it along to someone else when you're done, along with the guide and the DVD, so that we can continue to reach more people with this project.

Vel Phillips

First African American woman to graduate from University of Wisconsin Law School

First African American and first woman Milwaukee Alderman

First African American judge in Wisconsin

First African American and first woman elected to statewide office (Secretary of State)

Vel Phillips was born in Milwaukee in 1924. She graduated from North Division High School and went on to Howard University to get her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1946. In 1951, she completed her L.L.B. at University of Wisconsin Law School.

From 1956-1971, Phillips served on the Milwaukee Common Council. In 1971 she was appointed Juvenile Court Judge of Branch 13 in Milwaukee. Phillips served as a lecturer at UW-Milwaukee and visiting professor at Carroll College and UW-Law School.

In 1978, Phillips was elected as the Wisconsin Secretary of State, making her the first African American constitutional officer in Wisconsin.

Discussion Questions

Opening questions:

What surprised you most about the film?

What lessons can you take away from the film?

If you could ask Vel Phillips one question, what would it be?

In 1967, when Vel Phillips told the Milwaukee Common Council that “the eyes of the nation, indeed, the eyes of the world, are upon Milwaukee,” she used the power of television to take her message to the masses, and she used this same medium as part of her campaign to educate and change public opinion.

What might a 21st century grassroots information campaign look like? Consider today’s benefits of a plugged-in society, offering fast, cheap and easy ways of reaching more people more efficiently than ever before. But also consider the challenges of breaking through the noise of so many competing causes and voices. How might you approach mounting a similar campaign today?

Between 1960 and 1967 the construction of Highways 43 and 94 led to the destruction of over 14,000 inner core housing units on Milwaukee’s near north side – an area that housed more than 90% of Milwaukee’s black community. Without Fair Housing provisions African Americans, regardless of their financial means, were unable to find quality, affordable housing in many areas of the City and County.

Have you ever faced a situation where you were denied equal access to housing, services, or jobs based on your race, gender or other aspect of your identity?

In the documentary many of the people interviewed discuss the systemic, or institutional, discrimination which the Fair Housing Act eventually changed, at least on paper. Does systemic, or institutional, discrimination still exist today, and if so what are some examples?

Given discrimination is illegal now, how would you compare today’s brand of institutional discrimination to that of pre-civil rights America?

Vel Phillips frequently participated in nonviolent civil rights protests against discrimination in housing, education, and employment during the 1960s.

Why did people, especially Vel Phillips and Father Groppi, join the fair housing campaign and the marches? Have you ever fought for something because it was the right thing to do, even if it didn't directly benefit you?

Why was nonviolent protest such an effective strategy for bringing about change during the civil rights movement?

How do you explain community division and resistance to societal change like we saw in the 60s, and some might argue we're seeing again today with cases like Ferguson and even Milwaukee? How else can messages of change be brought forth in communities, in addition to nonviolent protest?

The leaders of the African American freedom struggle in the United States believed that there were times for civil disobedience—when behaving justly requires people to break the law. Vel Phillips, especially as a member of the Common Council, had to decide whether she should break the curfew law to join the marches.

What would you have done?

At what point do unjust laws, or unequally enforced laws, need to be broken or ignored in the pursuit of large societal good or change?

What other alternatives, or additional steps, might you take to raise awareness of and push for change of bad laws or policies?

Despite the concerns of her husband and mother, Vel Phillips decided to go ahead and join the Fair Housing marches.

How do you explain her decision despite the very real danger of violence?

Vel Phillips learned about poverty in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Milwaukee as a volunteer for the League of Women Voters. She has been a volunteer her entire life.

Why is it important for Ms. Phillips to volunteer?

How can volunteerism change communities, and the lives of both the residents and volunteers?

Since change can start in your own neighborhood (or school, etc), what are issues you'd like to see addressed that impact lives close to home?

Education has played a critical role in the life of Vel Phillips, from her beginnings in public school in Milwaukee to her undergraduate days at Howard University and her law school days at UW-Madison. Throughout her adult life, Vel Phillips encouraged and assisted scores after her to pursue a higher education. Vel Phillips continues to support formal education as a critical ingredient in building strong communities.

What are the relationships between education and opportunity, and how can this be modeled for young people?

Since it continues to be demonstrated that early childhood education plays a powerful role in preparing children for more success academically, do you feel your community has resources in place to meet the needs of a potential shift in education like this?

What are some ways your community could be helping ensure more success for students in their academic careers?

Wrap-up Questions

Do the experiences of Vel Phillips remind you of the experiences of people in your local community or someone you know?

Recapping your conversations, did any themes or patterns emerge or repeat?

What are your big dreams, both personally and for your community? What can you do to achieve them?

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