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95-year-old Aberdeen civil rights advocate awarded for seven decades of leadership in Harford County



Ninety-five year old Bertha Copeland, recipient of the 2025 Harford Civil Rights Project Civil Rights Leadership Award, surrounded by pictures of 5 generations of family at her Aberdeen home. (Brian Krista/Staff)



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At 95, Bertha Copeland has dedicated most of her life to civil rights leadership in Harford County.

Last month she received Harford Community College's 2025 Harford Civil Rights Project Civil Rights Leadership Award for her lifetime achievement and dedication to civil rights.

Born and raised in Florida in the middle of the Jim Crow era, she has lived much of her adult life in Aberdeen. She hopes her perspective on the importance of fighting racial injustices will be passed on and improve the lives of future generations.

Copeland's introduction to racial injustice occurred as a child growing up in Lake Wales, Florida. Living with her parents and five siblings in the all-Black part of town, she recalled seeing members of the Ku Klux Klan walk through her neighborhood one night when she was 10 years old.

"Being that young you're afraid to see somebody ride through with the hoods and all that," she said. "My dad and my mother grabbed us all and we went back into our bedrooms scared to death because we didn't know what was going to happen."

After marrying her late husband, James Copeland in 1949, the couple relocated to Aberdeen in 1952. While working as a licensed practical nurse at the Perry Point Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Cecil County in the

1950s, Copeland began her work in civil rights leadership seeking racial equality, according to Harford Community College. A leader in the Hamilton Court Association, she sought to improve working living conditions and fair housing opportunities for Black families in Aberdeen.

In the 1960s, she led an effort to mobilize car transportation barred from crossing the Hatem Bridge between Perryville and Havre de Grace on their way to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and organized bus trips to the Harford County Courthouse from Aberdeen to help people register to vote.

In the 1970s, she continued her involvement in politics by serving as an election judge to ensure fair representation at the polls.

"We got a bus together one time and we took about 200 to 300 people back and forth to vote and some had never voted before in their life," she said.

Copeland also participated in the 1997 Million Woman March and the 2000 Million Family March, according to the college. In 2011, she was recognized as a Harford Living Treasure by the Harford County Council and Harford County Public Library.



Bertha Copeland, recipient of the 2025 Harford Civil Rights Project Civil Rights Leadership Award, at her Aberdeen home. (Brian Krista/Staff)

Copeland said it was her desire to help others that led her to her civil rights leadership.

"When we came around, I just felt that we could do better because we worked hard to try to take care of our families," she said. "We just found that it was too much discrimination, so that's when I got involved."

Copeland has also been a member of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Aberdeen since 1956, where she has been involved in many church activities and service to her community.

Lenora Robinson, 77, of Aberdeen, who has known Copeland for nearly six decades, said it is important now more than ever for her story to be told.

"Now that we're experiencing almost going backward in the world with this new administration, the effects of Ms. Bertha Copeland dating back to the 1960s and also helping with jobs and freedom fund situations, her impact will always be remembered," she said.

Copeland said she is grateful to have been able to play a small part in bringing about change in Harford County.

“Only people can bring about change, one or two people can’t do it, but if you do it with a big group, you can change things,” she said. “Even though I’m a small person, look at the big people that have done a lot of powerful things and I’m a part of that group.”

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