

Theodis Palmer (September 23, 1926, to January 3, 2019)
Leader, Visionary, and Barrier-breaker

Theodis Palmer founded and led the Sumter YWCA, founded and became the first president of the Sumter League of Women Voters, and was the first African-American woman to serve on the SC League of Women Voters state board.



South Carolina's delegation to the national convention of the League of Women Voters of the United States, Washington, D. C., May 1970. Left to right, Penny Crane (Columbia), Norma Rogers (Columbia), Isabel Peterson (Aiken), Candy Waites (Columbia), Theo Palmer (Sumter), Barbara Moxon (state board), Diane Haselton (Clemson), Keller Bumgardner (state president), Beneta Clute (Charleston), Vauda Allmon (Greenville), Letha Waldron (Charleston).

Theo was on the LWVSC board as chair of Human Resources from 1967 to 1971, while Keller Bumgardner (Barron) was state president. During this time there was intense and increasing interest in the area of human resources. State efforts included participation in conferences on education

and housing, an informal coalition with state organizations, and letters to the governor and state and national legislators on matters concerning discrimination and poverty. Theo Palmer and her sister Grace wrote a “myth explosion” flyer called “The Black and White of It” that was widely distributed by the LWVSC (from *Proud Heritage, History of the League of Women Voters, 1920-1976, p. 67*).

See below for more information about Theo’s remarkable life.



Theodis Parsons Palmer was a wife, working mother, educator, businesswoman, church leader, social worker, administrator, advocate for women and their families, activist for civil rights and social change, and a visionary. Mrs. Palmer founded and led the Sumter YWCA, was the first president of the Sumter League of Women Voters, and was the first Black woman to serve on the SC State Board of the League of Women Voters.

Theo was a graduate of Sumner High School (St. Louis, Missouri) Class of 1943, attended Lincoln University (Jefferson City, Missouri), and graduated from Howard University in the Class of 1949. She earned a degree in business administration at Howard and completed further studies in business at American University (Washington, DC). She was employed in Washington, DC, for many years, but then she married Robert John Palmer (Bob), and they moved to Sumter, S.C., in July 1955.

Through her own observation and the guidance and mentoring of her mother-in-law, Eliie Naudin, Theo was shown how to break through color barriers while strengthening

the role of women; this led to her community choices in activism and her leadership role in the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

Theo and her husband Bob were in the heart of segregation and the Civil Rights movement at a time when the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education had just been decided. Behind the scenes, Freedom Riders were fed, provided overnight accommodations on her living room floor, and lunches were packed to assist them with their travels. The incident of Rock Hill, South Carolina, occurred the day after the Freedom Riders had spent the night in her home. The ambulance service of the family business was being used to transport national and state Civil Rights leaders to safety and responding to false calls by the Klu Klux Klan while taking local residents to hospitals, those who had died while incarcerated and those lynched had to be returned to their families and buried. Theo helped to plan strategy in church basements, listened to CB radios of impending danger and reported happenings to liberal news sources such as The Charlotte Observer. In the 1960s, Mrs. Palmer quietly walked the picket lines (even while pregnant), marched for social change, and went to jail in white gloves and heels. Yet in the midst of it all, meals had to be prepared, children had to be protected, and safety was paramount.

For many years, Theo provided a safe haven, through the YWCA, for children in day camp. Theo coached students on how to take advantage of opportunities, how to challenge, and how to reap the benefits of the integration laws that had been passed. Theo encouraged them to challenge their parents as to why they had to go in the back door, or why certain public facilities were off limits. If any authority challenged them, she encouraged the young people to be courteous but continued to ask the probing "why" questions and to persist in correcting injustices.

She imported international and Ivy League college students through Teacher Corps in order to expose children from the segregated south to the Arts. She created programs for strengthening basic skills in math, English, creative writing, drama, and other fine arts. Theo transported children to worlds they had never seen: Poinsett State Park, state historic sites, Washington DC; Williamsburg, Virginia, New York and college tours before they became popular. Local African American children were exposed to life skills such as swimming and etiquette. When Black children could not use public swimming pools, she transported them to Shaw Air Force Base for lessons. Later Bates Pool was built.

As a result of her non-violence strategy, the following entities were integrated in the Sumter community: The Red Cross, YMCA, theaters, playgrounds, and local parks. Drama productions related to self-pride and barrier-breaking were conducted—all to build the confidence level of the young people. Thus Theo represents one of the "unsung heroes of the Civil Rights Movement."

At the time, Theo was one of only three Black Executive YWCA Directors throughout the country. She received national and global training and was the person sent to evaluate YWCA self-reviews on the one imperative—the Elimination of Racism. As a result of her

work and out of appreciation, the YWCA offered to send her to seven countries to examine programs and to suggest how programs could be implemented globally with limited resources.

For over 44 years, what many could not see and many said could not be accomplished, Theo brought to fruition. Breaking barriers became her business.