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## Dottie Mulkey: A Profile in Courage and Humility

She didn't join the Army after high school because she didn't think she looked good in brown. Blue was more like it, so the U.S. Navy it was. But at 5 feet ½ inch and 98 pounds, she was a half-inch too short and 2 pounds too light to meet the minimum requirement. To make a long story short, Uncle Sam took her anyway.

That's as good a jumping-off point as any to let you know that Dorothy Mulkey knew early on what she wanted and how to get it. "I don't know how to take 'no,'" she says. "If someone tells me, 'No,' that just means no for today. Tomorrow, I'm back in your face."

She says this without sounding the least bit off-putting. To the contrary, this lifelong Baptist churchgoer, now 65 but looking much younger, comes across as pleasant as an ice cream social on a sunny afternoon.

But here's our plot twist: This isn't a story about a nice lady who lives in Santa Ana and goes to church on Sunday. It's about a woman who earned her place in Orange County history in the tough days of 1960s racial discrimination and who then settled into anonymity.

It's unusual to trot her story out in 2005, because people under a certain age are sometimes startled to hear how it used to be — how a young woman like Mulkey, newly married, 23 and pregnant, could be told by a Santa Ana apartment manager in 1963 that, despite the "For Rent" sign outside his building,

she and her husband couldn't have a look at it.

History only knows how many couples would have walked away and headed for another part of town. Lincoln and Dottie Mulkey weren't the type.

There was no confusion or misunderstanding. The Mulkeys were black. Even though the Legislature had passed an anti-housing discrimination bill, the California Real Estate Assn. knew the prevailing winds and sponsored Proposition 14 in 1964 to overturn it. By a nearly 2-to-1 statewide ratio, and with an even greater majority in Orange County, Proposition 14 passed and the law was scuttled. The rationale was that apartment owners should have the right to rent to whomever they wanted, for whatever reasons.

Dottie Mulkey had heard about the apartments from a stranger she'd met at the beauty parlor. The stranger turned out to be Scottie Biddle, a leader in the local NAACP chapter. When Mulkey later told Biddle about the apartment episode, she invited Mulkey to the next NAACP meeting.

At that meeting, the seed was planted that changed Orange County. Believing that Proposition 14 wouldn't stand constitutional muster, the NAACP leaders asked if the Mulkeys would go back to the apartments and ask to rent. Assuming the rental manager would turn them away, the plan was to have a white couple follow in their tracks and, presumably, be shown the apartment.

That is exactly what happened. The response: With the Mulkeys as the plaintiffs, the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union sued the apartment owner. The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court and, in a 5-4 decision in 1967, the high court essentially threw out Proposition 14.

To call it a milestone in fair housing is to state the obvious. So why, then, did Mulkey not become famous? How is it that the family name was lost to modern-day historians?

"What I set out to accomplish has happened," she says, as we talk at the Second Baptist Church in Santa Ana, her home congregation since 1962. "If people find out about it, that's OK and I don't mind telling the story. But it's not my personality to say, 'Look what I've done. Come see about me.' I don't do that."

She remembers the local media covering the story, but says it didn't turn her head. "It didn't really change me into the false belief that I was something other than what I was. I didn't consider myself a celebrity then, and I still don't. I think most people have causes they fight for or some they ignore. I just chose to fight for one. But I'm not puffed up to think that means I'm more than I am."

She and her husband divorced in 1982; he now lives in Florida. Dorothy Mulkey never remarried.

She was never a raging political activist. She worked at a bank, and her husband was a

postman. She just wanted a nice place to live and refused to accept what she considered substandard housing.

Last Thursday, Mulkey put on her good clothes and attended the annual banquet of the Orange County Human Relations Commission. The Mulkey name had been so forgotten that not even Rusty Kennedy, longtime head of the commission and whose father had been active in antidiscrimination battles in the '60s, knew of her.

He made sure that changed last week, when Mulkey was immortalized — or, at least, honored — by receiving the commission's Community Leadership Award.

Kennedy says he counts Mulkey among the "unsung heroes" of Orange County and "an icon of fair housing."

Mulkey enjoyed the evening but laughingly insists that even it didn't go to her head.

Of course, her three grown daughters know of her past and Mulkey isn't shy about passing it on within the family circle. One of her six grandchildren lives with her, and, Mulkey says, "I tell my granddaughter that without history, you don't have a present. You need to know these things. But when people meet me, I don't say, 'Oh, do you know who I am?'"

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