

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

Rosa Parks Memorial Award

Presented to a nominee who, like Rosa Parks, inspires others to champion the cause of human and civil rights.



Caroline Hunter
Member, Massachusetts

Civil Rights activists and ethicist Derrick Bell once wrote: “Courage means putting at risk your immediate self-interest for what you believe is right. In fact, risk-taking is probably the most defining act of an ethical life.” Rosa Parks put at risk her immediate self-interest for what she believed was right. So, too, did Caroline Hunter.

At the age of 21, fresh out of Xavier University, New Orleans, Hunter landed a good job as a chemist at the Polaroid Corporation. Then one day, quite by chance, she spotted in her workplace an enlarged South African photo identification card. The year was 1970, decades before the anti-apartheid movement in the U.S. had gathered steam. But Caroline Hunter knew the significance of that photo identification card. It was part of what Nelson Mandela called “the hated document”—that is, the South African passbook all Blacks in South Africa were required to carry at all times. It was an important link in the chain that the Apartheid regime used to control and monitor the movement of Blacks.

Polaroid had in fact been doing business with the apartheid government of South Africa for years. Most important was its ID-2 system, which consisted of a camera, instant processor and laminator. It could generate a photo identification card in just two minutes and more than 200 in an hour—exactly the technology the apartheid government needed to enforce its Pass Laws Act.

After finding the mock passbook, Caroline Hunter and her colleague (and later husband) Ken Williams, a photographer at Polaroid, launched their campaign. They distributed fliers around the workplace, alerting their colleagues to Polaroid’s complicity with apartheid. They organized demonstrations outside the company’s headquarters, and they spoke out to the larger community. Up until this point, Polaroid had a reputation as a liberal company—“an equal opportunity employer.” But the Polaroid management did not take well to the protests, and they fired Hunter and Williams. But the pair’s hard work and sacrifices paid off. By 1977, Polaroid completely pulled out of South Africa, and the international divestment movement, which eventually crippled apartheid, was on its way.

Quite fittingly for a person of conscience, Caroline Hunter went on to become a teacher. She was a secondary science and math teacher, and she organized a number of school-community projects such as the Supplementary Learning Center for at-risk youth. She also taught math to parents of Boston public schools students in Saturday workshops.

In the 2000s, Caroline Hunter became an assistant principal, after earning her Masters of Education from Harvard Graduate School of Education. As such she was responsible for the management of all student data in the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. Now retired, she has never ceased being a social justice activist.

