

LENA O'REE

1915-2003, Saint John, New Brunswick



CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Lena O'Ree was a lifetime civil rights activist in New Brunswick, from Saint John. As a teen, O'Ree had tried to join her local Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), but the organization told her they would not make concessions for one Black woman. She then organized her friends to join and returned; O'Ree and her fellow Black women became the first Black members of the YWCA in Canada. In the early 1950s, O'Ree worked as an elevator attendant at the Admiral Beatty Hotel in Saint John. Following conventions of racial segregation at the time, policy stated that Black staff and guests were required to use the hotel's back doors. O'Ree refused, forcing the hotel to change its rule. O'Ree was later a member of Pride of Race, Unity and Dignity through Education (PRUDE), and relentlessly continued her work on racial equality in New Brunswick. She was honoured in 1998 by the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission for a lifetime of contributions. David Peters of PRUDE noted that "[O'Ree] was just an ordinary person who decided she would no longer accept the indignity of segregation." In 2003, the Telegraph Journal described her as Saint John's "greatest pioneer for racial equality."