

# Welcome Class of 2012

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*Ann Gregory* was a pioneering Black female golfer, a woman of many firsts, and a passionate and vocal civil rights activist. She won the United Golfers Association (UGA) championship four times, and blazed a trail for women, specifically, and people in general. In September 1956 she became the first African-American woman to play in a USGA championship. She would soon become a familiar face in national competitions, with her highest finish as runner-up in the 1971 USGA Senior Women's Amateur. A spectacular athlete, Ms. Gregory won the City of Gary (IN) tennis championship, and is attributed with shattering segregation at Gleason Park, a local municipality, in the early 1960s. "My tax dollars are taking care of this golf course," she declared, "and there's no way you can bar me from it." She played the golf course unbothered, and it has been open to all ever since. During her career that spanned five decades, Ann Gregory won nearly 300 tournaments. Perhaps her crowning achievement

came in 1989 when, at the age of 76 and competing against a field of 50 women, she won the gold medal in the U.S. National Senior Olympics beating her competitors by 44 strokes.

Ann was born in Aberdeen, Mississippi on July 25, 1912. She was the middle child of five. Upon graduating from school in 1930, she headed to Gary, Indiana to stay with her older sister and brother-in law, Robert and Robbie Gholson.

Naturally athletic, Ann began playing tennis and by 1937 she had become so good that she won the Gary City Championship. A year later she married Leroy Percy Gregory. Her husband was an avid golfer who never missed a chance to play. In 1943, during WWII, he was drafted into the U.S. Navy.



It turned out that golf was a source of some frustration early in their marriage in that Percy was spending too much time on the golf course. However, when he entered the military Ann took up golf to pass the time. She would bundle up their only child (JoAnn) and head to the golf course. By the time her husband was honorably discharged from the service at the end of the war in 1945, Ann had become a pretty good golfer. She received instructions from pro golfer Calvin Ingram who hailed her as a natural athlete who could hit the ball a mile long.

She entered her first tournament in 1945 the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Chicago Women's Golf Club, and finished second. After winning a number of black-only tournaments including the championship of UGA, an

organization for African American golfers, Ann was invited to play in Chicago's George Mays Invitational Tournament Tam O' Shanter, where she was the only African American woman on the golf course. In 1948, Ann went on to win her first of five Chicago Women's Gold Club tournaments, which was a record. In 1950, she won six of the seven tournaments she entered. It was during this period of time that Ann became known as the "Queen of Negro Golf."

During this period of time she recognized that in order to improve her golf game she would need to move



beyond the circuit of black golfers. With the support of the Chicago Women's Golf Club (where she was the club champion), and many others, the club applied for affiliate membership with the United States Golf Association (USGA). In 1956 this club became the first African American organization to join the

USGA, opening the door for her to play at the Meridian Hills Country Club in Indianapolis, Indiana on September 17, 1956, where Ann became the first African American to play in a USGA women's amateur national championship. This was the beginning of many firsts.

Ann's husband Percy was her confidant and number one supporter. He was a member of the Par Makers Golf Club, where Ann retired three leg trophies in her hometown at South Gleason Golf Course. In a career that spanned five decades, Ann took home over four hundred trophies and won over three hundred golf tournaments from all over the world to include Pepsi Cola International Championship titles in Puerto Rico (1963 and 1964), Nassau (1965), Jamaica (1966), Spain (1967), and Hawaii (1968). During her career Ann played golf with noted celebrities Jackie Robinson, Joe Lewis, and Althea Gibson.

Growing up during segregation, Ann had to endure incidents of extreme racism yet from a deep well of character she was able to overlook these indignities. Ann took a stand where she demanded to play the full 18 hole layout at South Gleason Golf Course in her home town breaking the color barrier. In the summer of 1996 a granite marker was erected to honor her memory at the sixth hole of the South Gleason Park Golf Course -the same course she integrated. At the 1988 Senior Women's Amateur Golf Club at Sea Island, Georgia, she said, "Racism is only in the mind, it's something you look over or you look at it".

It is generally recognized that Ann's trailblazing efforts paved the way for other African American golfers. As noted in Arthur Ashe's book, *Hard Road to Glory*, many observers hailed Ann Gregory as the best African American female golfer of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Sports Illustrated honored Ann with an article in 1991 entitled *Playing through Racial Barriers*.

Ann was also a community champion serving as the first African American to be appointed as a Trustee of the Gary, Indiana Public Library Board. She was also an executive board member of the Gary, Indiana United Fund, and an advisory board member of St. Mary's Mercy Medical Center. She was an ardent churchgoer and a Trustee board member at Delaney Memorial United Methodist Church. Additionally, the Gary Post Tribune featured many articles in reference to her civic and golf accomplishments.

In June, 2000, The Urban Chamber of Commerce in Las Vegas, Nevada held the first of 7 annual Ann Gregory Memorial Scholarship Golf Tournaments awarding scholarships in excess of \$200,000 to deserving college students. Upon her death in 1990, Ann was eulogized as a breath of fresh air and an inspiration to golfers and anyone else who might otherwise have been afraid to face new frontiers. She endured painful slights with warmth, humor, courage, and good sense. She cherished the game and in the end she honored it.

Ann is survived by her daughter JoAnn, and son-in-law Dr. E. "Louie" Overstreet, P.E., granddaughters Lorie and Piper, and great-grandson Torrance.

Hall of Fame Inductee:

- United Golf Association, 1966
- African American Golfers Hall of Fame, 2006
- National African American Golfers Hall of Fame, 2011

Ann Gregory is referenced in the following books:

- Hard Road To Glory by Arthur Ashe
- Forbidden Fairways by Dr. Calvin Sinnette
- The African American Woman Golfer *Her Legacy* by M. Mikeell Johnson, PH. D.
- Heroines of African American Golf by M. Mikeell Johnson, PH. D.