

Mayor's Report

In Memory of Barbara Catherine Howard (May 8th, 1920 – January 26th, 2017) — 'B.C. Sports Hall of Fame' Inductee and 'Freedom of the Municipality' Recipient



Barbara Howard

On January 26th, 2017, long-time Belcarra cottage-owner — since 1957 — Barbara Howard passed away, just three months short of her 97th birthday.

Born and raised in Vancouver at 10th and Nanaimo, Howard's family's roots predate the incorporation of the city itself. When the great fire of 1886 struck, Howard's grandfather, who owned a barbershop at 25 Abbott Street, picked-up his most valuable possession — his barber's chair — and carried it on his back as he ran to the safety of Burrard Inlet.

"I was brought up British," she says. "There were English, and Irish and Scotch and one black family and we were all poor, but it was a close-knit community."

Howard's natural speed first became evident in Grade 6 at 'Laura Secord Elementary School'. The principal rang the school bell in the yard and she could sprint the last block-and-a-half and be in her desk on time for class. Soon she was school champion. At 'Britannia High School', she quickly established herself as one of the fastest young sprinters in B.C.

In 1938, at the age of seventeen, Howard ran the 100 yards in a scorching time of 11.2 seconds at the Western Canada 'British Empire Games' trials. The blistering time bettered the 'British Empire Games' record of the day by one-tenth of a second, and was fast enough to leave several established Vancouver sprinters in her wake. The result earned her selection to represent Canada at the 1938 'British Empire Games' in Sydney, Australia.

After the month-long trip by boat aboard the R.M.S. 'Aorangi (II)', Howard, who had never left Vancouver before, became a minor celebrity "Down Under" appearing on the front pages of several Aussie newspapers; black athletes being a rarity at the time in Australia. In fact, she is believed to be the first black woman athlete to represent Canada in international competition. An admirer gave her a stuffed koala bear as a gift.

At the Games, slightly overwhelmed by the attention and homesick for her family and friends back in Vancouver, Howard finished sixth in the 100-yard dash, yet she helped the Canadian 440-yards and 660-yard relay teams to silver and bronze medals respectively. But Barbara was devastated, as she felt she'd let her country down, and has been quoted as saying: "I went to Australia thinking I was supposed to get a Gold medal — I was so disappointed in myself."

She was determined to run at the 1940 Olympics in Tokyo. Then the Second World War came, and her dreams of competing on the Olympic stage were dashed. The 1940 Olympic Games and 1944 Olympics (slated for London) were cancelled, and her sprinting career was over by the time the Olympics resumed a decade later.

Since 1956, Barbara lived on Capital Hill in North Burnaby overlooking Indian Arm and her cottage on Belcarra Bay. Barbara studied teaching at the 'Vancouver Normal School', graduated from UBC with a Bachelor of Education degree in 1959, and was the first black teacher hired by the 'Vancouver School Board' where she taught Grades 3 to 8 physical education classes, including eight years at Strathcona. She worked as a Vancouver school teacher for 43 years until her retirement in 1984. She never married.

In 2010, coincident with the Vancouver Olympics, the Vancouver Parks and Recreation Department included Howard among a series of 12 posters of “Remarkable Women” displayed in schools, libraries and community centres. In 2012, Howard received numerous honours including induction into the Burnaby, British Columbia, and Canada Sports Halls of Fame. In 2013, Barbara Howard also received the ‘Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal’.

Barbara was predeceased by her father Samuel, her mother Cassie, sisters Melba, Goldvine and Priscilla, and her brother Charles. Barbara will be lovingly remembered by her niece Charline, grandnephews Kevin and Darin, great-grandnephew Dakota, nephew Charles, grandniece Danielle, and great-grandnephew Orion.

On February 27th, 2012, Belcarra Council awarded Barbara Howard with ‘Freedom of the Municipality’ in recognition of her contribution to sport, which represents the highest honour that a municipality can bestow on an individual.

Ralph Drew Mayor



City of Vancouver Archives (CVA 371-1643).

Barbara Howard at the 1938 ‘British Empire Games’.