

# Perseverance – an Antidote to Obstacles

## A Tribute to Black History and Women’s History Months

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The months of February and March hold great significance in our nation, deservedly. These designated blocks of time are set aside for a vital purpose: to reflect on, honor and encourage conversations about African American legends and historic women.

Raising awareness of impactful individuals, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, is imperative. Recognition of these standouts must be recurring; by default, it helps people broaden their knowledge of those who have left indelible marks on society through remarkable contributions, stories or acts of bravery. It’s the responsibility of everyone to lift up such extraordinary heroes and make sure their impressive endeavors not only are not forgotten, but are discussed in classrooms, around dinner tables and widely known.

**It is through stories of adversity and strength that we gain insight, empathy and understanding.**



*Dr. Georgiana Simpson, 1921*

It’s a true honor to feature one such impactful person, a woman who actually belongs in both monthly celebration categories as she was an African American legend and a woman who made history. I am talking about Georgiana Simpson, born in Washington D.C. in 1866, the first-ever Black woman to receive a PhD in the United States. What makes this achievement even more noteworthy is that her secondary level schooling took place during segregation, and she faced brutal resistance to her pursuit of higher education.

In 1907, as a 41-year old high school teacher, she left Washington D.C to pursue her bachelor’s degree at the University of Chicago. However, pervasive racism on campus and within housing resulted in the university president asking Simpson to leave. She was given the option to complete her

undergraduate studies through summer classes and correspondence courses, with which she complied. Four years later, in 1911, Simpson received her bachelor’s degree in German. Undaunted by the previous pushback, Simpson returned to campus. Though the racism and controversy persisted, Simpson went on to complete a master’s degree (1920) and, in 1921, shattered the ceiling when she received her PhD in German and Philology, all from the University of Chicago.

Following her attainment of her PhD—and wanting to give back to the African American community— she returned to Washington D.C. to teach at Dunbar High and, eventually, HBCU Howard University.

Having passed away in 1944, Simpson has left behind quite a legacy through her blazed trail.

Within two weeks after Simpson received her doctorate, two other Black women, Sadie T.M. Alexander (UPenn) and Eva B. Dykes (Radcliffe), earned their doctorates as well. By 1943 at least 45 Black students—despite a hostile, inequitable environment—earned doctorates from the University of Chicago.

A consistent and lifelong advocate for rights of oppressed and marginalized people, Simpson marched in the 1913 Women's Suffrage Parade at the age of 48.

By sharing Georgina Simpson's story today, I hope you feel inspired to further discuss her incredible accomplishments with others and help enhance awareness of her legacy.

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