

ALUMNI HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE

Cora Jones Thurman

Cora Jones Thurman was a trailblazer in every sense of the word. Born on March 9, 1894, in Hamilton Township, she grew up during a time of profound change—just 29 years after the Civil War and decades before women gained the right to vote. In 1904, her family moved to Gahanna to operate a dairy farm on the land now known as Friendship Park. That same year, Cora entered 5th grade as the first and only African American student in Gahanna Schools. In 1913, she broke new ground again as the first African American graduate of Gahanna High School, a remarkable feat at a time when high school was not mandatory.

After graduation, Cora earned her teaching license from The Columbus Normal School, which later became a lifetime credential. Her career began in 1915 in Jackson County, where she was the district's first African American teacher. Two years later, she returned to Franklin County to teach in Urbancrest, again serving as the community's first African American educator. One of her pupils, Ellen Walker Craig Jones, went on to become the first African American woman elected mayor in the United States and an inductee into the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame—a testament to Cora's influence.

Cora's career spanned 42 years, with assignments in Mansfield and Columbus. Beginning in 1932, she devoted 26 years to special education in Columbus Public Schools—long before federal protections for students with disabilities. At the same time, she pursued her own education at Capital University, Miami University, Chicago State, The Ohio State University and Hampton Institute, now known as Hampton University. She graduated with honors from Hampton in 1944 and, just two years later, earned a master's degree in special education, joining fewer than one percent of African American women nationwide to hold an advanced degree at the time.

Her work with disabled children was groundbreaking. Cora believed her students were defined not by their

challenges, but by their potential. She created hands-on projects that encouraged independence, teamwork and pride. In 1950, her class of boys ages 11-14 built a toy-lending library for underprivileged children, constructing puzzles and games from scraps and managing the library themselves. For Cora, "the real value is not in the projects made but in the development of the pupils who worked together to complete it."



Beyond her classroom, Cora became a leader in remedial education, training teachers across Columbus, presenting at national conferences and advocating for "the misunderstood child." Her work predated both the Civil Rights Movement and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, positioning her as a true pioneer for equity in education.

Cora also served her community through civic and church organizations, adult education classes and programs for senior citizens. In 1956, she received both the local and national Sojourner Truth Award, honoring her community service, advocacy for women and commitment to equality.

From becoming Gahanna's first African American graduate in 1913 to shaping generations of students through her visionary teaching, Cora Jones Thurman exemplified resilience, service and leadership. She reminds us that history is shaped not only by extraordinary events, but by ordinary people who inspire extraordinary achievement in others.

MESSAGE FROM CORA:

"The real value is not in the projects made but in the development of the pupils who worked together to complete it."