

## Biography of Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965)



**Lorraine Hansberry**

"Black" was the word handwritten on Lorraine Vivian Hansberry's birth certificate on May 19, 1930. The hospital had printed "Negro", but Carl and Nannie Perry Hansberry crossed out the hospital's label and asserted the right to designate their child's racial identity on their own terms. Challenging the system was part of the Hansberrys' way of life. Carl had achieved success in real estate and banking even in the midst of the Great Depression. He and his wife raised four children on the South Side of Chicago. Lorraine was the youngest of these children. Separated from her siblings by seven years, she often played alone. In addition, her family's affluence separated her from her peers. Her father was a successful businessman, and had run for Congress. Her uncle was a well-noted college professor at Howard University. Lastly, her mother, a former school teacher, was a committeewoman. Lorraine often felt the desire to be more like the friends she went to school with. She recalls wearing a roller skate key around her neck so that she could pretend she was a "latchkey" kid.

The Hansberry household was in no way typical to the South Side of Chicago. People like W.E.B. Dubois and Paul Robeson were close family friends, and made frequent visits to the house. In addition to his other accomplishments, Carl Hansberry was very active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When Lorraine was eight years old, the family had just moved into a predominantly white neighborhood, and her father was in the midst of the landmark Supreme Court case *Hansberry v Lee* involving housing discrimination. The Hansberrys won the case, yet still faced many trials. The hostility from the white neighbors grew, and eventually a mob threw bricks and broken concrete into the Hansberrys' house. One of the pieces barely missed young Lorraine's head.

Lorraine graduated from Englewood High School in 1948 and attended the University of Wisconsin. She excelled in the humanities, but struggled with the required science courses. Two years later, Hansberry left college and moved to New York to pursue her writing career. Living on the Lower East Side, Lorraine was free to explore the life of Harlem and Greenwich Village and participated in protests about racial discrimination and various other forms of social injustice. Her first job was as a secretary for *Freedom*, an African-American newspaper founded by activist Paul Robeson. She initially was hired as the secretary, but eventually began writing and editing articles. In particular, she criticized the media's representation of blacks as unintelligent and sub-human. During her time in New York, Hansberry also attended classes at the New School for Social Research, which enabled her to focus more on the subjects of her interest.

In June of 1952, she met a young man named Robert Nemiroff while they were both protesting segregated sports teams at New York University. Nemiroff was the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants who owned a downtown restaurant, and Hansberry spent many afternoons there with his family and friends. Not long after, on June 20, 1953, Hansberry and Nemiroff were married in Chicago at a ceremony that both families attended. Hansberry worked to support her husband through his graduate studies in literature at New York University by doing several odd jobs, including a two-week camp for adults to promote racial unity. In 1956 Nemiroff was able to achieve financial security when he wrote the hit song "Cindy, O Cindy", and began to help support his wife's writing career.

Hansberry's dedication to writing paid off when her first play won popular and critical acclaim. *A Raisin in the Sun* won the Drama Critics Circle Award for 1958-1959. Hansberry went on to write *Les Blancs* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. Some of her other works include the screenplay *Drinking Gourd* and the autobiographical piece *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*.

On January 12, 1965, Lorraine Hansberry died an early death at the age of 34 after a struggle with pancreatic cancer. That same night, the curtain closed as *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* gave its last performance. Inscribed on her tombstone is the following passage from the play:

I care. I care about it all. It takes too much energy not to care...The *why* of why we are here is an intrigue for adolescents; the *how* is what must command the living. Which is why I have lately become an insurgent again.