



## The Life of a Pioneering Feminist and Civil Rights Activist

By

Terry Catasús Jennings and Rosita Stevens-Holsey

Pauli Murray was a thorn on the side of white America [of Franklin Roosevelt and subsequent presidents] demanding justice and equal treatment for all. She was a civil rights and women's rights activist before any movement advocated for either—the brilliant mind that, in 1944, conceptualized the arguments that would win *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas*, and in 1964, the arguments that won women equality in the workplace. Throughout her life, she fought for the oppressed, not only through changing laws, but by using her powerful prose to influence those who could effect change. She lived by her convictions and challenged authority to demand fairness and justice regardless of the personal consequences. Without seeking acknowledgement, glory, or financial gain for what she did, Pauli Murray fought in the trenches for many of the rights we take for granted. Her goal was human rights and the dignity of life for all.

## Awards:

Winner: Septima P. Clark Award, 2023, National Council of Social Studies.  
Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection

## Praise for Pauli Murray:

"This is a compelling biography of an 'unsung force'-an inspiring and transformative figure who broke barriers pivotal to both the civil rights and women's movements."--*Horn Book Magazine*

"This inspiring biography in verse aims to promote the life and work of the lesser-known yet influential Black civil rights activist and feminist."--*Booklist Reviews*

"Pauli Murray was brilliant, outspoken, and committed to achieving dignity and equality for all under the law. Rising from poverty, Murray challenged pervasive race and sex discrimination and helped launch the two most important movements of the Twentieth Century: civil rights and women's rights. This new biography capsulizes important events and accomplishments of an iconoclast who would not take 'No' for an answer. Young readers will be drawn to the story of Pauli's bravery and pivotal role in history." -- Christian F. Nunes, President, National Organization for Women

"...the inclusion of too-often-unrecognized details of Murray's accomplishments in education, law, and activism, combined with the harsh sociopolitical context she emerged from, make for an undeniably potent story."  
— Kirkus

"This is a detailed and nuanced poetic biography of Pauli Murray's life and work as a lawyer, scholar, women's and civil rights activist, priest and poet... The intersectional position Murray occupied provides a lens into multiple perspectives and issues within civil rights movements. Murray's work consistently changed the status quo and compels us to continue to challenge norms today." - Elizabeth Sturm for the National Council of the Social Studies Septima P. Clark Book Award.

## About the Authors:

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## **Mini Bio:**

Terry Catasús Jennings is a Cuban-American writer who found Pauli Murray while writing *The Women's Liberation Movement 1960-1990*. Her biography in verse of the feminist and civil rights activist won the Septima P. Clark Book Award for 2023 from the National Council of Social Studies. Her goal in life is to lead us to embrace our common humanity, as well as sing the praises of Cuban food. She is represented by Natalie Lakosil of Looking Glass Literary and Media Management.

## **Short Bio:**

Terry Catasús Jennings is a Cuban-American writer who found Pauli Murray while writing *The Women's Liberation Movement 1960-1990*. Her biography in verse of the feminist and civil rights activist won the Septima P. Clark Book Award for 2023 from the National Council of Social Studies. Like Pauli Murray who said she was a human who happened to be a woman and happened to be Black, Jennings is a human who happens to be a woman, happens to have been born in Cuba, and is of indeterminate skin color. Her goal in life is to lead us to embrace our common humanity, as well as sing the praises of Cuban food.

Terry came to the United States from Cuba as a twelve-year-old. Her father had been jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion and was freed. Without knowing much English, Terry embarked on her new life in the United States. Being the only Cuban in her school, from middle school through college, Terry knows what it's like to be the new kid on the block.

She is the author of the Definitely Dominguita chapter book series which was named Best Books of 2021 by School Library Journal, Kirkus and Parents Latina. It was recommended by [WeAreTeachers.com](http://WeAreTeachers.com) as one of 21 must-read chapter books for third graders. Her picture book, *The Little House of Hope* from Neal Porter Books/Holiday House is a semi-autobiographical story about immigrants. It was named best book of the year by the Chicago Public Library, the New York Public Library and Bank Street College and selected by El Día de los Niños / El Día de Los Libros.

Terry is delighted that she found Rosita Stevens-Holsey, Pauli Murray's niece, to join her in bringing Pauli's remarkable story to the page for young readers.

## **Long Bio:**

Terry Catasús Jennings is a Cuban-American writer who found Pauli Murray while writing *The Women's Liberation Movement 1960-1990*. Her biography in verse of the feminist and civil rights activist won the Septima P. Clark Book Award for 2023 from the National Council of Social Studies. Like Pauli Murray who said she was a human who happened to be a woman and happened to be Black, Jennings is a human who happens to be a woman, happens to have been born in Cuba, and is of indeterminate skin color. Her goal in life is to lead us to embrace our common humanity, as well as sing the praises of Cuban food.

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embarked on her new life in the United States. Being the only Cuban in her school, from middle school through college, Terry knows what it's like to be the new kid on the block.

As a child, Terry dreamed of being an author, but she was dissuaded from a writing career and instead majored in math and physics at the University of Richmond, in Virginia. She worked in finance for many years. Terry began writing in earnest when her children were in high school. She wrote for newspapers and magazines, as well as educational text for the Smithsonian and internet sources. She has written science based narrative non-fiction and non-fiction.

She is the author of the Definitely Dominguita chapter book series. The series is about a Cuban American third-grader who has modern day adventures while pretending to be characters in the classics her Abuela read to her as bedtime stories. The first book, *The Knight of the Cape* was named Best Books of 2021 by School Library Journal and Kirkus and Parents Latina. It was an honorable mention International Latino Book Awards. It was recommended by [WeAreTeachers.com](http://WeAreTeachers.com) as one of 21 must-read chapter books for third graders. Her picture book, *The Little House of Hope* from Neal Porter Books/Holiday House portrays her immigrant experience in the hopes of showing how a helping hand in a new land can make a life-saving difference for a family. It was named best book of the year by the Chicago Public Library, the New York Public Library and Bank Street College and selected by El Día de los Niños / El Día de Los Libros.

Terry lives with her husband in Reston, Virginia and enjoys spending winters hiking and biking in Southern Utah. She enjoys visiting with her five grandchildren and often encourages them to bring their parents along. She is a member of SCBWI, Las Musas Latinx Collaborative and the Children's Book Guild of Washington, DC. She is delighted that she found Rosita Stevens-Holsey, Pauli Murray's niece, to join her in bringing Pauli's remarkable story to the page for young readers.

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### **Bio:**

Rosita Stevens-Holsey, niece of Reverend Dr. Pauli Murray, is a dynamic educator, writer, activist, and community engager focused on sharing stories of historical and pioneering voices for children and adults to be inspired by. Rosita Stevens-Holsey is president of Preserving Pauli Murray, LLC, which she founded to enhance the legacy of her aunt, The Reverend Dr. Pauli Murray.

Prior to moving back home to Washington, D.C., Ms. Stevens-Holsey was a Systems Engineer for IBM; a Regional Coordinator of Minority Studies for the Department of Defense Overseas School System; Founder of a management consulting firm in Atlanta, GA; and Director of the Regional Minority Purchasing Council in partnership with the Savannah Chamber of Commerce. Before returning to teaching in 2008, Ms. Stevens-Holsey was an Advocate, Program Coordinator, and Director of a non-profit organization which provided services for persons with disabilities. She holds a B.S. in Science and Education from State University of New York and a Master's Degree in Counseling and Human Services from Boston University.

Ms. Stevens-Holsey is co-author of *Pauli Murray - The Life of a Pioneering Feminist & Civil Rights Activist*. Murray's achievements as a writer, activist, attorney, and an Episcopal priest are now being uncovered, rendering her life and legacy stronger and more relevant.

Ms. Stevens-Holsey is a contributor, supporter and board member of the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice in Durham, North Carolina. She has followed her Aunt Pauli's lead in advocating for human rights issues and fighting discrimination against women, minorities, and

those in need. Part of her present work is to support and enhance organizations' efforts to promote her aunt's legacy through speaking and personal appearances. Ms. Stevens-Holsey shares much of her Aunt Pauli's story through her Instagram and Facebook pages.

<https://www.instagram.com/preservingpaulimurray/>

<https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=preserving%20pauli%20murray>

## Additional Information About Writing the Book:

### Meeting Pauli Murray:

I found Pauli while writing *The Women's Liberation Movement: 1960-1990*. I think it's out of print now, but when I was writing it, I found that Pauli was responsible for the rights that women enjoy today. She was responsible for including gender as a protected category in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and she was one of the founders of NOW. And two things happened. One is that I became profoundly grateful to Pauli. Pauli Murray's advocacy directly changed my life for the better as a young woman. The other thing that happened is that I became interested in her as a writer. How was it that I had never heard of someone so consequential as Pauli? Why was it that no one had written books for children about her? Heck. There weren't many adult books about her. So I read her biography. And then I read *Proud Shoes*, the book that she wrote about her family and the history of African Americans in the United States. Each book sent me into different avenues of research—her relationship to Eleanor Roosevelt, her relationship to Caroline Ware, the National Organization for Women. The more I read, the more I wanted to read. And the more I read, the more the need to tell her story to young readers became evident.

### Meeting Rosita Stevens-Holsey

Pauli Murray was a feminist. That was the story that I wanted to tell when I first met her. Even her being denied credit for her contribution to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, was because she was a woman. But Pauli Murray was Black and I wasn't sure that I could tell the story, respectfully, completely and accurately. I reached out to the Pauli Murray Center, and spent time talking to its director, Barbara Lau. Through her, I got the contact information for the Pauli Murray Foundation, but I was unable to reach anyone in the foundation. A friend, Tony Whitehead, who had participated in the Civil Rights Movement read the book, and made great comments. Still, I felt like I was missing a key piece. When I heard, through Barbara Lau that Howard University was presenting a play about Pauli Murray titled "To Buy the Sun," I decided that I had to go. Maybe that was the place where I would meet somebody who knew somebody who could get me close to the family. But when I got there, the front couple of pews (it was held at the Chapel at Howard) were reserved for the Pauli Murray family. And I stalked them. When they finally walked in, I don't even think I gave them a chance to get comfortable. I told them that I wanted to write a book about Pauli Murray and was hoping that one or many of them would help me. And the coolest thing happened. Rosita Stevens-Holsey raised her hand. She was a teacher and her mission was to bring Pauli's story out. To me it was like meeting Santa Claus. I was giddy. I went to Rosita's house later that week, and then we spent four or five days together, creating outlines, and hashing things out. Rosita talked to her cousins and I listened. It was a dream come true.



## Research:

It was wonderful to have Pauli Murray's autobiography as a source. From that, I learned all that Pauli would tell, but not everything there was to know. I read just about everything she published except for the Book *States Laws on Race and Color* which is a compendium of each Jim Crow law in every state, town, or municipality in the United States. I read her poetry, her newspaper articles. And of course I rounded out the research with books written about her and books and newspaper articles about her and about the time. After learning all I could learn from that, I still had questions. I visited the Radcliffe archives and I read Pauli Murray's actual correspondence. Held papers that she had written. Saw her letters to her lover, Renee Barlow. Saw the notes she made for her discussion with her surgeon before her appendectomy. That was a surreal experience. But that experience was surpassed by listening to Rosita telling me of her recollections and listening as she talked to her cousins to put together the family picture of Pauli Murray. I was very fortunate to have been able to have those last two experiences.

## Why did you choose verse to tell Pauli's story?

I tried to tell Pauli Murray's story in many different ways. As a juvenile biography—a long picture book, let's say—and as a straight biography. But it never felt good. I don't know how many times I wrote her story until I tried to write it in verse. And when I wrote it in verse, it felt good. It felt right. I felt like I could get to the heart of the story.

## Publishing story

The book was first scheduled to be released in November of 2022. It was quickly brought back to January 4, 2022. I believe it was important to bring Pauli Murray's story to young readers as quickly as we could. And then the pandemic shipping crisis happened and the book was pushed back to February 8th. I think we all feel fortunate with that date.

## What do you want young readers to get from Pauli's story

I hope I'm not putting words in Pauli Murray's mouth, but in my eyes, Pauli Murray believed that the Fourteenth Amendment was the most important law for the protection of human rights. For instance, Pauli Murray was not for passing an Equal Rights Amendment to protect women's rights. Not for the same reasons that the Amendment's opponents—like Phyllis Schlafly articulated. Pauli knew that women's rights were already protected by the Fourteenth Amendment and there was no need for an additional Amendment. What I want young readers to get out of reading Pauli's story is of course, her story of perseverance and fighting against all odds. I want them to understand how terrible the Jim Crow South was and the importance of never, ever, allowing that sort of humiliation and discrimination to happen again. But more importantly I want young readers to understand the importance of the Fourteenth Amendment—that all laws have to be fair. And to understand that they must exercise their right to vote and fight for their right to vote for representatives who will uphold the Fourteenth Amendment and for Presidents who will appoint judges that will uphold the Fourteenth Amendment.

## What was the highlight of your research?

The day I met Rosita Stevens-Holsey and realized that her mission matched mine—we both wanted to make Pauli Murray's story known to young readers—was definitely a personal highlight. The days that I got to hold Pauli Murray's correspondence and notes, had touched at the Radcliffe Archives touched me deeply. Especially the pages she had handwritten. Seeing the telegram she sent Aunt Pauline when she was arrested—don't worry, arrested, won't be home for Easter, let the NAACP know—that was a confirmation of Pauli's personality. She didn't mean to start an incident, but once it had started, she was elated.

Another highlight was when I finally found that yes, indeed, Pauli had come up with the idea that won *Brown v. Board of Education*. When I found corroboration of that, I was the one that was elated.

## There are some pictures in the book, where did they come from?

Pauli Murray chronicled her life, and she kept photographs. Among the documents she gave to the Radcliffe Archives, there were more than 700 photographs. This was a record that, at the risk of seeming trite, spoke louder than words. There was her relationship to Peg Holmes. Her dressing like a boy/man. Her relationship to Eleanor Roosevelt. The early pictures of the family, Cornelia and Robert Fitzgerald, the young Murray family, Pauli's pictures as a baby and toddler and at her high school graduation, were a window into her life. We were very fortunate to have access to see those, and we were very blessed that the Pauli Murray Foundation gave us permission to use them.

## What I owe Pauli Murray

When I first graduated from college, I went to work for my local telephone company, in the engineering department. They recruited women with Math degrees. I was told the range of salaries was \$7,000 - \$9,000 per year. Since I had good grades, worked while I attended school, and had participated in student government, I qualified for the highest amount. And I was elated. None of the girls with whom I graduated—those who actually found work—were making that kind of money. Problem was that the young men hired at the same time as I was, and with the same credentials, had a different range. Theirs was \$12,000 to \$15,000. Because Pauli Murray made a speech which said that women should not be afraid, if necessary, to form an association like the NAACP to advocate for their rights, Betty Friedan became her friend. Those two women, and Pauli's network, tried to make sure that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—the agency set up to enforce the 1964 Civil Rights Act—adjudicated women's complaints. When they were unsuccessful with the EEOC, the group formed the National Organization for Women. NOW litigated cases of discrimination against women in the work place. One of those cases was against AT&T, my employer. Because of that suit and settlement, I was given a raise and back pay. Over the thirteen years that I worked for AT&T, it was a very significant amount. So yes, I had a very personal connection to Pauli Murray. I also got married on her 61st birthday.

## Additional Questions and Answers:

### When did you become interested in writing?

I've wanted to write since I was a young child. I wanted to be like Jo March, in *Little Women*. I even lived in a house with an attic for about a year and went up to the attic to write. I wrote a few very forgettable stories as a young girl. But in eleventh grade, my English teacher singled me out in front of the class for writing words she “knew” could not be part of my vocabulary in an assigned essay. She accused me of using the Thesaurus because I was Cuban. I definitely didn't have that kind of vocabulary. I hadn't, but I was humiliated. I had signed up for her creative writing class my senior year and I took myself out of that class. I eventually decided to major in Math in college. My math teacher, Mrs. Vaughan, had always been supportive and she believed in me. I ended up attending her Alma Mater, the University of Richmond.

It is also important to understand that my parents would not have approved of an occupation as insecure as writing. The combination of those two things steered me toward a more secure career. But stories never stopped rolling around in my head. When my children were of an age when their schools no longer needed me as a volunteer, I decided to give writing a chance.

### What sparks your creativity?

What sparks my creativity is getting the idea of a character in a situation. For Pauli Murray, what sparked my creativity, was “meeting” her as part of my research for my book *The Women's Liberation Movement: 1960-1990* and learning her amazing story. I am often very creative while I am walking or riding my bike. Or working in the garden. I can work out problems while I exercise.

### How did your experience as a young immigrant shape your life and your writing?

As a young person, when I first came to the United States, I experienced some subtle and some not so subtle forms of discrimination. Those experiences, while nothing like what we see now, were hurtful. Trying to avoid discrimination shaped all my choices in my early life. I decided to learn English as well as I possibly could, assimilate and lose my “Cubanness” in order to be accepted. That need not have happened. I believe I can speak eloquently in both English and Spanish on the need to impress readers with the humanity of each of us. On how at our core, we are all the same. How the sum of small, thoughtless acts can change the trajectory of a life—never mind the impact of the systemic racism that afflicts our society. There is no way that my experience is as devastating as Pauli Murray's, but I can empathize deeply with Pauli Murray's point of view.

## What is the most rewarding and/or challenging about writing children's books?

The reward is connecting with a reader and making a difference. My hope is to reach children and cement the belief that there are no “others,” that we are all human. Dominguita, the main character of the Definitely Dominguita series is every child. Whether she is American, Cuban or the descendant of a purple popsicle, she loves and misses her grandmother, tries to manipulate her brother, flirts with disobeying her parents, loves sweets, has moments of brilliance and moments of sheer folly. She is just as human as any of her readers. She is just a kid who happens to live in a household where black beans and rice with a side of plantains are a staple.

In *Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist and Civil Rights Activist*, I continue to cement that belief. I tried to emphasize, through Pauli Murray's life, the pain of discrimination; to emphasize the roller coaster human rights have taken since the end of the Civil War; and to emphasize the importance of protecting the rights given to each human by the Fourteenth Amendment through voting once they are able. From a craft standpoint I love seeing a story take shape and finally say exactly what I meant it to say. The challenge is writing in a voice appropriate for the age group, especially dealing with topics as complex as those in Pauli Murray's life.

## When did you first realize that you were not thought of as equal to Americans?

I became a very good friend of the daughter of a Girl Scout leader when I first came to the United States. She invited me to join the troop. On our first camp out, I expected to share her tent. Instead, an African American girl and I were put in a tent by ourselves, by the smelly latrines, while all the other ten girls slept in two six-person tents. It became clear to us both that we were considered “other” and less than the rest of the troop.

## Why did your family come to the United States?

An autocrat, Fidel Castro, was allowed to take power over the government of Cuba in January 1, 1959. He allowed no dissent, freedom of speech, or freedom of religion. He wrecked Cuba's economy and became a puppet of the Soviet Union. At first, my father was not allowed to leave the country because he worked for the Cuban equivalent of the Federal Reserve System, but in April of 1961, he was jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion. People yelled for him to be executed by firing squad behind our house for the two nights he was in jail. Luckily, he was freed by Ché Guevara after three days. We came to the United States soon after that with \$50 for our whole family to begin a new life. We lived with one uncle for a while and a second uncle for a while longer. We were one of those families who lived twelve or fourteen people in the same house. My father finally found a job at the Richmond Federal Reserve Bank two years after we reached the United States. It was not at all at the level at which he worked in Cuba, but it allowed our family to thrive.

## How long did it take you to write the story?

I “met” Pauli Murray in 2012. I was working on another book at the same time, so I began researching in 2016. The book began as a picture book, then became a juvenile biography, then a full-fledged biography and then finally a biography in verse. I met Rosita in June of 2018 and, if I can trust the names of my files we began to edit with our agent in early 2019. We submitted a proposal to little bee books in December 2020 and the whole book in January of 2021. The editing process was very short. We had actually finished editing the book before we signed the contract. Originally the book was scheduled to release in November 2022, but the decision was made in the summer of 2021 to bring the book up for a January 4th release. Pandemic shipping problems moved that date back to February 8, 2022. So the short answer is six years.

## What was the favorite line you wrote?

This is my favorite verse:

But, before she died,  
as if warned by a crystal ball  
that her own life would last no longer  
than a whisper on a windy night,  
Agnes asked her sister Pauline to take care of Pauli.

## Were you a reader?

Learning to read in Spanish is not difficult. It is totally phonetic and there are only 27 or 28 sounds (don't hold me to that, but it's a very small number). I learned to read when I was three. My mother was sewing on her pedal sewing machine and I would ask her the sounds of the letters on the bubbles in the Sunday comics (Cuban). I remember that vividly. I read for myself from that point on, often staying under the covers with a flashlight to read. As I got older, my father, who was a banker, gave me an allowance. I can't remember how much it was. The only thing I had to do to earn it was to keep an account of what I spent on a green accountant's sheet. It was easy. Every Saturday I spent \$0.25 for the movies and \$0.05 for a Sugar Daddy which lasted the whole movie. The rest I spent on books. There was a bookstore about two blocks from my house and I would go on author binges. The owner of the bookstore often ordered the books that I wanted. It was easy to keep track of that.

Once Castro came and things got bad, my mother decided to quit work. She was a professor at a teacher's college, and she really couldn't NOT work. So she volunteered at my school. I was reading so much that she convinced the Mother Superior at my school to tell me that I should stop reading and instead have more friends. My books were my friends. That is something that I have in common with Pauli Murray.