

## V101 - Lincoln Ragsdale part 2 - AL

Welcome to Valley 101, an Arizona Republic and azcentral.com podcast where we answer your questions about Phoenix and beyond. I'm producer Amanda Luberto and this is part two of the Lincoln Ragsdale story.

If you haven't listened to last week's episode, I suggest pausing this episode and listening to part one first. In it we covered Lincoln's time as a Tuskegee Airman, coming to Luke Air Force Base, and his instrumental role in desegregating Phoenix schools.

In 1953, Superior Court Judge Fred Struckmeyer declared that separating students by race in the Phoenix Union High School District was unconstitutional and that students had the right to attend any high school they wanted.

This was the nation's first court decision saying that school segregation laws were unlawful.

One year later, the US Supreme Court ruled on Brown vs. Board of Education and unanimously decided to integrate schools across the country. A momentous step forward in the civil rights movement in America.

### **\*theme up to fade\***

But that wasn't the only first Lincoln Ragsdale achieved in 1953. When talking about the changes he made in Phoenix, you also have to talk about Eleanor, his wife.

Eleanor Dickie Ragsdale was born in Pennsylvania in 1926 and the two married in 1949. As the pamphlet from her funeral says, this marriage set in motion events that forever changed the history of the city, county, and state.

She was an educator and worked as a teacher at Dunbar Elementary School, which was once an all-Black school. She was described to me as queenly, gracious, charming and graceful.

Truthfully, Eleanor could be her own episode altogether. She was Lincoln's partner in starting the Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity. She was a community organizer for the local NAACP. She was a member of The Links, a national invite-only organization for prominent Black women. Notably, Vice President Kamala Harris and civil rights activist & Malcolm X's wife Betty Shabazz are also members.

[00:27:16] **Matthew:** She was from a very prominent black family, too, going back generations [00:27:21][4.8]

This is Dr. Matthew Whitaker. You'll remember him from part 1. Among many other titles, he wrote a book about Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale and their impact on Phoenix.

[00:27:33] **Matthew:** ~~But~~ she went to Cheney University, which is the oldest historically black college in the country. Most people don't know that. And she studied to be a teacher and she became a teacher. And when she was introduced to Lincoln here, her brother, William Bill Dickey, was a friend of Lincoln, and he said, I got this. I got a sister that I want you to meet. And she came in on the train and they met and they hit it off almost immediately, in part because they had seen some of the same interests and aspirations, which was to serve the community and to advance people of African descent.  
[00:28:10] [37.0]

For the golfers who are listening, yes, he is referring to *that* Bill Dickey. Eleanor's brother Bill was a golfer here in Arizona, but more importantly he was an advocate and fundraiser for golfers of color. The Bill Dickey Scholarship Association has donated more than \$3.8 million to scholarships for college-bound minority golfers.

**\*music cue\***

Eleanor and her brother were both fair skinned and Matthew says she and Lincoln used this to their advantage.

[00:28:12] **Matthew:** Many people who don't understand who black people are didn't realize that she was black because they considered blackness to be dark and immutable. And so she used that against the status quo, quite frankly, to help desegregate the Encanto Palmcroft area. That was her [00:28:34] [21.7]

Here's the legend of the house on Thomas Road, where the Ragsdales moved in 1953. As we spoke about last week, redlining was very prominent in Arizona at the time. Black people could only own homes and businesses south of Van Buren Street. Now, if you know the grid of downtown Phoenix, I'm sure you'll know that Thomas is *north* of Van Buren Street.

I'll let Lincoln Ragsdale Jr tell the story.

[00:43:20] **Lincoln Jr:** my mother would drive down the alley or my dad because he worked late many times in the mortuary business. And so he only had a chance to see the house by peering over the oleander fence and looking into the backyard, so he never had a chance to go inside the house until we basically had bought the home at the last minute. Basically, my mother didn't even buy the home. Another gentleman bought the home Anglo-Saxon man and at the time of closing, then he basically quit claimed the property over to the Ragsdale as my mother and father. And that's how that happened. [00:43:57] [37.5]

Lincoln Jr. is the third child and only son of Lincoln and Eleanor. And he's correct. Eleanor would drive by the house at 16-06 West Thomas Rd at night as to not be detected and Lincoln would sneak quick glances. He was more dark skinned than Eleanor and thus in more danger while driving around the Encanto neighborhood.

When they found the house they wanted to buy, the Ragsdales asked a white friend of theirs to purchase it for them and transfer the title to them.

They were the first Black family in this neighborhood. And it came with troubles. Reports of people spray painting racial slurs and even death threats came while they lived there.

The year was 1953. The Fair Housing Act wouldn't be passed for another 15 years.

**\*music cue\***

Through the Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity, both Lincoln and Eleanor were able to accomplish a lot. Not only for themselves, but for others. Many have credited this to Eleanor's grace combined with Lincoln's vigor.

Civil rights attorney Herb Ely, who we met in part 1, puts it this way:

[00:08:37] **Herb:** I want to say there were many others involved in that. But Lincoln was unquestionably the leader because he had what we call in Yiddishchutzpah. He had nerve that was unbelievable that other people didn't have. And while on the one hand, he worked with George Brooks,

George Brooks was a minister and fellow civil rights activist.

**Herb:** And George and he were very effective. But Lincoln was the more effective in terms of having getting a relationship where people would understand and respect him on a day to day basis.

[00:09:14][36.5]

One of the biggest battles Lincoln fought was against the banks. Here's Matthew again:

[00:21:23] **Matthew:** You know, he with George Brooks and his wife, Eleanor targeted the business structure first. It was banks. It was Valley National, which eventually turned into Bank One, which is now Chase. — they protest. They went to the bank. The president was Jim Patrick at the time, and they said, Listen, we deposit money in this bank and collectively that's turning into lots of money, but we can't get any loans. So not only are you discriminating against us. Many of us, many of whom were veterans, we fought in the war to make the world safe for democracy, but we're not experienced at home. Not only

are you not providing loans to us, but our money, the banks are subsidizing loans that you're giving to white people,  
[00:22:09][46.1]

This...didn't go over well. Which is why, Matthew says, he went with George Brooks. George was a minister and was well-known in the community. He was President of the NAACP, while Lincoln was Vice President. So they would often tag team.

[00:22:24] **Matthew:** So when folks did not acquiesce to their demands, he chained himself to the bank downstairs, right in front of the door and refused to leave. He, with other leaders, encouraged black people to go to the bank and withdraw their money in pennies that didn't ~~go overall. We'll go over too well~~ [00:22:47][23.4]

Even though it annoyed people, the tactic that the duo coined as "creative conflict" worked. Banks agreed to integrating the Valley National workforce, and loans for people of color became easier to obtain. This helped many start their own businesses.

They protested places like the El Rey Café in central Phoenix. The plot is currently empty, but it was between LoLo's Chicken and Waffles and The Duce on Central Ave. It was a Mexican American restaurant that wouldn't serve people of color. This was a protest that the youngest Ragsdale, Emily, remembers from her childhood.

[00:44:15] **Emily:** And to show how I wasn't prejudiced and didn't really know what was happening other than we were picketing. My mother gave me some money, says Go in and order a cheeseburger. So I went on in and said, Yeah, I'd like to have a cheeseburger, please. I said, Well, we don't serve your kind. And I'm like, my kind? I didn't quite know what that meant. So I went out to my mom. So here's the money back. ~~They would sell my.~~ They don't serve my kind. What's my kind mom? And she's you're beautiful. Just go on, have fun. Because I was seven years old. [00:44:52][36.4]

El Rey Café protests were some of the most notable pickets and sit-ins during this time. The Ragsdales famously fought for equal rights alongside Hispanics and Latinos in this area.

When your dad is one of the leaders of the civil rights movements, but you're also a young girl, your priorities are different.

[00:45:30] **Emily:** I was glad to have a day out of school. So, you know, we marched on down. I was just happy to be there, you know, and we set up the Capitol stairs inside ~~and with officers coming slowly taking us out. You know, they weren't hitting us. It's not like it's the self. It wasn't. We're hitting you with batons and training their dogs on you. And so and I was lucky to have a nice officer to, you know, be kind.~~ And I don't that many stories I know of dad spoken

like a lot of times I probably just fell asleep. I was there with mom and, you know, being together, just a regular thing, dad being up there speaking [00:46:15][44.4]

Just another day at work. Some people's parents are dentists. Some are change makers.

**\*music cue\***

Growing up in the Ragsdale house was in some ways no different than everyone else. There were four children: Elizabeth, Gwen, Lincoln Jr, and Emily. Each had after-school activities, interests and hobbies. Mom and dad went to work every day.

But in many other ways, it was a truly unique experience. Their parents' advocacy shaped their growing up years and their future lives.

[00:27:30] **Lincoln Jr:** It was very clear to us, all of us that, you know, we were in this situation that we were examples. And so when he would talk and speak, then we would like basically make sure that we were all together because it was important, as Emily had mentioned, **that and that** if you were one person by yourself, you were vulnerable. But if you were together as a group, you were safe. So we basically stayed together as a group, as children and in the process, as I was saying that, basically he always helped us maintain our self esteem. [00:28:08][37.9]

That is Lincoln Jr again. He remembers his parents trying to maintain a balance in the home, while also trying to discuss work.

[00:28:13] **Lincoln Jr:** I would have to say we, I felt like we had a happy childhood, but they had code that they would be talking in front of us. So if they were talking about a white person, they would say, W-, if they're talking about a black person or a black situation, they'd say B. So we didn't feel like there was a racial issue going on because they're using code, talking among themselves in front of us. [00:28:33][20.0]

Emily, the youngest, was born in the house on Thomas, and it's where these two grew up in their early childhood. But most of their memories are from the next big move. In 1969, the Ragsdale family moved from their house on Thomas to their house in Paradise Valley.

While it was admirable that a Black family was moving up to such a rich area, Lincoln Jr. remembers it ostracizing them from the community.

[00:28:44] **Lincoln Jr:** Since we're away from them, they didn't get a chance to really embrace us because every time we transitioned from living on 1606 West Thomas, where we could go to Encanto Park and go

swimming and play at the golf course, there at Encanto Park and go fishing and enjoy life right at that time, they transitioned us to Clearwater Hills and Paradise Valley, right across from Paradise Valley Country Club and the people at Paradise Valley Country Club. I went there one time and they with a friend of mine and the parents of the friend that I went with were informed that they asked their son not to bring me to Paradise Valley Country Club anymore. So basically, after moving to Clearwater Hills life was not as good because before I could go play golf and in kind of a park, I could ride my bicycle around. I could enjoy the swimming pool. But then once we moved to Clearwater Hills, which is a gated community, we were basically isolated from the Black community and then also isolated somewhat from people that of that economic class were very negative and were not embracing. [00:30:03][78.9]

**Lincoln Jr referred to this as being the casualties of the civil rights war: the children that had to go into the environment that their parents were integrating.**

[00:17:21] **Emily:** I started at Saguaro High School. Lincoln was a year older than I, and I went to an art class and our teacher said, I want everyone to decorate the outside of the folder, the hall, wherever they want it. So I took the black crayon and chalk and just started covering it as black. And next thing I know my dad's at the school talking to me says, What are you doing here? What is this? What you put in black all over this? Well, it was kind of a cry out for help. I didn't know what to say. You know, I need a little more support here. You know, you guys are busy doing your stuff. Here I am the first only black girl, only black child. My brother was there too at school. And, you know, it was a new experience. [00:18:11][50.6]

**Suddenly they were stuck between not being good enough for the White community, but being at an arm's length from the Black community.**

**Matthew noted to me that a younger generation of civil rights activists in Phoenix were feeling the same way about the Ragsdales.**

[00:40:10] **Matthew:** He was considered radical in the 1950s and the beginning part of the 1960s. By the time we get to the end of the 1960s, when the Black Power movement is ascending and becoming more prominent, particularly with younger people, he was then perceived as being the older, more moderate or conservative black leader who had bought into capitalism, you know, and bought this estate in Paradise Valley, and what do you want to know about us? You're rich now? You know what? You know, how do you understand our movement, which is what young people do. [00:40:53][7.0]

From not being wanted at the community pool or accepted by the neighbors, Emily mentions even the smallest things stood out.

[00:22:05] **Emily:** But it was a learning experience that, you know, it was hard in lots of ways because a high school boy ever asked me on no dates at all. [00:22:16][10.8]

And really when you're in high school, prom is the most important thing.

**\*music cue\***

Emily does have some good memories from living in Paradise Valley.

[00:22:23] **Emily:** Once we moved to Clearwater Hills, we had motorcycles like that, Lincoln and I would ride. and I rented a horse, and so I had a lot of wonderful experiences. [00:22:32][8.8]

Because the family was well off and now living adjacent to Scottsdale, Emily fondly recalls riding horses growing up and of course, just like dad, flying airplanes.

[00:14:25] **Emily:** I remember when I was going for my pilot's license, when I just turned 17 and I was, it was the third time I was going to fly with this man at school and I walked up and he says, Where's a driver's license? And he just he filled me for the third time and I said, Oh, no, I'm not going to do this, I'm not going to pass. So I went and called my dad and I was crying and I said, You know, the man, dad, I'm not going to be able to get my license because he's flunked me for the third time and it's just not going to happen. And dad said, You know what, Emily, you started this program. You're going to finish it. No one's going to ask you how many times it took you to get your license. All they're going to know is that you have a license. [00:15:12][46.9]

[00:19:55] **Emily:** Yeah. Quitting was not an option, actually *\*laughs\**  
[00:19:58][2.5]

Only Lincoln Jr. and Emily had their pilot's license in addition to dad. Lincoln Jr. put it in simple terms when I asked why:

[00:52:30] **Lincoln Jr:** Well, we had an airplane, and if you have an airplane, you better learn to fly. If you got a boat, you learn to drive it. If you got a Porsche that has a gear again, you know you have to shift. You learn how to do that. So I mean, we were all I can say back in 1961, I remember my mother saying that before we had a lot of furniture in the house, my dad went out and bought a plane. So we were little and he would put us all in that plane and we would,

you know, I don't want to say that maybe aren't supposed to strap two kids together with one seatbelt, but I think that's what he did. And we would fly with my dad wherever he took us, and it was a wonderful experience. We didn't know it was just a means of transportation for us. We didn't know that other than the thing about other people not having airplanes or whatever we were, just that was our life. And we just went with it. [00:53:24][54.1]

...We're going to take a short break...

**\*app ad read from KM\***

All while flying around with his family and emphasizing the importance of education and strength at home, Lincoln Sr. was still pushing boundaries alongside Herb Ely.

In 1963, Lincoln ran for city council.

[00:06:32] **Herb:** as a result to a large extent of Lincoln's candidacy for the City Council under the Act campaign, which was in 1963. And that campaign was originated because the City Council then would not pass a Human Relations Commission or any ordinances. And we diversified the candidates and I, and it's easy for me to say because not just because I'm here talking about Lincoln, because it's true. Lincoln was the outstanding candidate because he would go to all different types of events and was so effective because so many of these people had never heard a black person that they associated with the articulate-ness that he had. That is the ability to get things across. And I just want to say that after the election was over and he almost won, we almost won got about 49 percent of the vote as a result, to a large extent, Lincoln stayed involved. [00:07:40][68.6]

Despite losing the election, in 1964, Lincoln and his allies lobbied the Phoenix City Council to pass a public accommodation law. This ensured that public spaces like restaurants, hotels, theaters, etc., are open to all races. Including the Wrigley Mansion, which held upscale events and dinners.

This one was personal to Herb.

[00:38:47] **Herb:** But in terms of legislation needs that were there, that took priority was the what was the necessity to desegregate public accommodations. And because all of the all of the major resorts, with one exception, would not would not allow Jews and blacks were of course, excluded. But the one this has to do with Jews and not blacks because Wrigley was the exception and was asked with respect because of allowing Jews and also started to accommodate



blacks. And Wrigley was allowed was asked why he was different than Camelback and the other resorts, he says, Well, Jews chew gum too, don't they? And so as the producer of Wrigley's Gum. So but but I think again, I think that the major thing in Arizona was what was the what was public accommodations. But clearly to the average person, the after the schools were integrated, although the integration came with bumps, but at least it started happening earlier than it did in other places in the country. [00:40:23][96.7]

Lincoln's urgency to break down racial barriers before most of the country caught the eye of a very important person at this time: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1964, King made a historic trip to Arizona and Lincoln was chosen as his escort around the Phoenix area. Famously, he spoke to a crowd of 3,000 people at Arizona State University- Lincoln introduced him.

A few years ago, a recording of these speeches were found. I tell the story in the Valley 101 episode from January 2022 about the city of Mesa's relationship to MLK Day. Unfortunately they are still under copyright so I can't play them for you. But you can listen to them by searching Lincoln Ragsdale Audio Recordings on the ASU library website.

In a 1993 article about Lincoln and his wife in Phoenix Magazine, Eleanor states that meeting King was a life-changing event.

The year King visited the Ragsdales and the city of Phoenix was the same year the US Congress passed the Civil Rights Act.

One year later in 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. Something you'll recall from part 1 that Lincoln had also fought for...before everyone else..

**\*music cue/pause\***

Lincoln died of cancer in June 1995. He lived in the house in Paradise Valley until the very end.

Now. Let's circle back to listener Cassandra's question from part 1. Who is the executive terminal at Sky Harbor International Airport named after?

Gary Martelli, the curator of the Phoenix Airport Museum, explains:

[00:04:16] **Gary:** From what I understand, there was a city councilman Cody Williams, who proposed the idea to name the terminal after Lincoln J. Ragsdale, because then Congress itself was very active in general champion for General Aviation to continue to stay at Sky Harbor. And so Cody Williams proposed the idea and then before City Council and it was approved. [00:04:41][25.2]

Gary is correct. In October 1995, just a few months after Lincoln's passing, city councilman Cody Williams suggested Lincoln's name to go on the executive terminal. In addition to everything he did for civil justice in Phoenix, Lincoln served on the Phoenix Aviation Advisory Board in the 1970s.

He fought to ensure that people with private planes could still fly in and out of Phoenix, and not be pushed out to the smaller airports in Scottsdale or Deer Valley.

[00:03:10] **Gary:** General aviation has always been really big in Arizona. So there's a lot of individuals that own their own planes and want to be able to fly to California or Sedona or wherever, you know, from the metro Phoenix area. And so the general aviation at one time was so big in Arizona that, you know, airports are rated based on their numbers of landings and takeoffs. And I believe we were like in the top 10, if not like number four one at one time in the 1980s because of the amount of general aviation. [00:03:45][35.9]

And even while he was fighting for equal rights and opportunity on the ground, he was fighting for the same in the air.

[01:01:28] **Lincoln Jr:** My dad was at the airport for 34 years. He had an airplane at Sky Harbor Airport. My dad loved to fly. My dad loved to go to the airport because we would go there as children and eat at the airport because you couldn't discriminate at the airport because it was federal. And so my dad loved the Grand Canyon and he loved going to the airport and we would go there all the time to eat. Back in the 60s. So luckily, ~~as I said,~~ Cody Williams put his name up there. [01:02:04][36.3]

Currently, general aviation and private pilots can still house their airplanes at Sky Harbor. Lincoln Ragsdale's name is still on the building. Important flights like sports teams and Air Force One still fly into the executive terminal today. The building also is the airport headquarters for Phoenix police.

**\*music up\***

Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale were change makers. They fought for an equal opportunity for all Arizonans at a time when the state was more divided than ever. They were also homemakers. Father and Mother. Herb, Emily and Lincoln Jr. reminisced on New Year's Day celebrations at the Ragsdale house where Eleanor would make a full spread of food and they'd all listen to jazz.

They were business owners: running a funeral home, an insurance company, a flower shop, a real estate agency and more. They pushed to integrate schools, neighborhoods, banks, businesses, and cemeteries.

Lincoln and Eleanor are both entombed in the once-segregated Greenwood Memorial Lawn Cemetery. A place they pushed to be desegregated.

I want to end with a quote from Lincoln Ragsdale from his celebration of life pamphlet his son so graciously gave me a copy of. It reads "Phoenix has always been wonderful! The good thing is that through it all, we've been able to overcome. Let the work that I've done speak for me."

**\*pause\* \*theme up\***

Thank you so much for listening to this week's episode of Valley 101. A special thank you to everyone who shared Lincoln's story with me.

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I'm producer Amanda Luberto, thank you again for listening. We'll see you next week.