Pauli Murray Project
Discussion Questions
Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family
By Pauli Murray

We would love to hear from you about your discussion of the book. Please drop us a line. --Barbara Lau, director of the Pauli Murray Project, balau@duke.edu or 919/613-6167. For more information about the Pauli Murray Project: www.paulimurrayproject.org

1. How do Pauli Murray’s descriptions of her family life in Proud Shoes compare to the story of your family? What are the similarities and differences?

2. Pauli Murray describes post Civil War North Carolina as a time when African Americans had a great hunger for education. Does this same hunger for education exist in Durham today? In the minds of the freed slaves, education was intimately connected to freedom and their own ability to rise in the world. How do you view the relationship between education, freedom and economic opportunity today?

3. The West End neighborhood and Maplewood Cemetery are both important places Pauli Murray describes in the book. What are your thoughts/memories about those places? How do you respond to Pauli Murray's description of Durham in its first seventy-five years?

4. Pauli Murray describes the very different early lives of her grandmother Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald and her grandfather Robert Fitzgerald. Their respective ideas about the meaning of the Civil War, Emancipation and Reconstruction diverged greatly even though they were married to each other and loved each other very much. How did reading these two accounts affect your thinking about the Southern experience during this time?

5. Pauli Murray said, “True emancipation lies in the acceptance of the whole past, in deriving strength from all my roots, in facing up to the degradation as well as the dignity of my ancestors.” (pg. 61) Pauli Murray, in this quote, was referring to her own personal journey. What does this mean to you when you think of the Durham community?

6. Pauli Murray carefully describes social relations in Durham at the end of the 19th and early 20th Century. How does her experience compare to social relations in Durham today? What kind of progress have we made? What issues continue to challenge us?

7. Pauli Murray talks about the shifting attitudes in Durham over time about race and suggests there is more to it than just black and white. How does your family or your personal experience compare to this idea?
8. Pauli Murray writes about her historical experience of the variations in skin color among both white and black Americans and its implications in terms of status and how people treated each other in public and private spaces. How do her observations compare to your/our contemporary experience?

9. Pauli Murray identifies herself as a mixed-race person as does Barack Obama. How do the ways Murray and Obama identify compare to mainstream racial categories? Do you think their perspectives offered them any new insights or understandings? Historically, white supremacists have used charges of miscegenation and "race-mixing" to instill fear and animosity in the larger community, and marriages among people of different races was illegal in many states until the 1960s. Today, the interracial landscape in American is very different. In your experience, how is mixed-race heritage viewed today? Could this identification be seen today as an advantage, or not?

10. After the Civil Way, Pauli Murray’s grandfather, Robert Fitzgerald, was very hopeful about the power of the voting booth for newly freed African Americans. He believed that reconciliation between the races was possible at that time. How do you view prospects of racial reconciliation today?

11. Pauli Murray very honestly describes her experiences around the issues of race, class, color and gender. How would you describe your experience around race, class, color and gender in Durham today? How might we describe our experience around race, class, color and gender as a community?

12. “As I look back on those years in grandfather’s house I see that I inhabited a world of unbelievable contradictions.” (pg. 266) In this quote Pauli Murray refers to the culture of her family in juxtaposition to the culture of the worlds, both white and black around her. She is also referring to her grandparents’ different experiences of the Civil War. What kinds of contradiction do you experience today? Are they focused on the same kinds of issues that Pauli Murray describes?

13. Durham is home to several monuments and public memorials, from the Confederate soldier on the lawn of the Durham County courthouse to the Pauli Murray True Community mural near Durham Central Park. What do you think about the value and importance of memorials? What or whom do you think should be memorialized in Durham?