

# Irene McCabe

Born in Pontiac in 1935, Irene McCabe seemed an unlikely candidate to become a crusader on the national stage. Her early years were steeped in the Greek culture of her parents. At the age of 36, however, the working-class mother of three children was drawn into a local protest over court-mandated school busing.

In 1971 U.S. District Judge Damon Keith ruled that Pontiac's segregated school system violated the 14th Amendment and he ordered integration by busing students to facilities outside their neighborhoods. Similar decrees had been imposed on systems across the country.

McCabe and other parents formed the National Action Group – NAG – to fight the order. Sit-ins, rallies and marches brought national attention to the group and the cause. She and five other NAG members walked to Washington, D.C. to pressure Congress while their lawyer, L. Brooks Patterson, worked through the courts to block implementation of Judge Keith's order. Their efforts ultimately failed.

After a successful real estate career, McCabe died in Clarkston in 2004.



# Irene McCabe's Pontiac

Pontiac is an industrial city located at the northern end of Woodward Avenue in Oakland County. Dating to the early 1800s, it developed gradually from an agricultural village into a thriving manufacturing center. After World War II, General Motors plants in the city employed up to 35,000 people making trucks, buses and Pontiac automobiles.

By 1970 Detroit's metropolitan area had expanded to include Pontiac's 84,000 residents. Most lived in modest, working-class neighborhoods that encircled its once prosperous downtown. Affluent residents were leaving an aging Pontiac for newer communities nearby.

Between 1965 and 1970, Pontiac's African-American population grew by 30 percent, doubling the number of black students in the school system. Because of segregated housing practices, blacks were primarily concentrated in an area of deteriorating homes and buildings on the city's south side.

To create equal educational opportunities, federal courts mandated a program known as "mandatory busing," which transferred students to Pontiac schools outside of their neighborhoods. Heightened racial tensions led to protests that made national news.



# Hero?

Leaders sometimes come from the most unlikely places and that was certainly the case with Irene McCabe. This blue-collar, working class mother became a community leader by simply standing up at a meeting and talking to other parents who shared her concerns. As it happened, a television news crew was present at that meeting, rocketing McCabe to instant notoriety.

McCabe believed in neighborhood schools and the right for a parent to select a safe school for their child. She reflected the views of many others in Pontiac and around the country, organizing the National Action Group (NAG) as a grassroots effort to stop governmental interference and social experimentation in schools.

Irene McCabe strongly opposed the practice of integrating schools by busing students to schools outside of their neighborhoods. She developed several strategies to fight this practice, including distributing informational packets and mailings, hosting media events and organizing marches. Despite several explosive incidents, she never advocated violence. McCabe was against the loss of neighborhood schools to busing, but not against integration itself.

McCabe appeared on national news programs and at rallies around the country. She became a voice for millions of Americans who objected to what they believed was a flawed Federal program and who were seeking a legitimate way to stop it. She was the embodiment of David fighting Goliath and was a hero to her supporters.



# Villain?

When it came to the issues of busing and racial integration, Irene McCabe believed that there was no role for government to play. She saw no reason for black or white students to be bused to schools outside of their community, disregarding her opponents' beliefs that this might encourage greater understanding and equality amongst races. Somewhat defensive about her own lifestyle, she felt that it should not have to change just to appease a Federal judge.

McCabe did not shrink from the spotlight, allowing the national media to focus its attention on her. Through interviews and television appearances, she became a lightning rod for the millions of Americans who believed that to be anti-busing meant endorsing inequality amongst the races. She was also criticized when the organization that she helped found, National Action Group, actively opposed the legally-mandated method to solve those problems, yet did not propose another viable solution.

In August of 1971, members of the Ku Klux Klan blew up buses that Pontiac was going to use to integrate the schools. Although McCabe disavowed the action and never personally advocated violence as a means of resistance, many believed that her tactics, including encircling schools with jeering protesters, encouraged others to violence and made her complicit in these attacks.

