

## Ethel Alexander Murray (1917-1990)

Ethel Murray was a woman with a deep sense of social justice, firm opinions, and a strong belief in her own self-worth. She was a young African American woman at a time when **segregation** was socially acceptable in many places, and her firm ideals led her into a number of confrontations.

Murray was born Ethel Alexander in Lincoln, Illinois on August 14, 1917. She had one sister, Marian, who always remained her great friend. Much of what is known about Murray comes from an **oral history** interview in 1985. Growing up in Lincoln, she said she didn't know what **prejudice** was. African Americans and whites lived together all over Lincoln in **integrated** neighborhoods and attended neighborhood schools together. There was prejudice there though, and when she discovered that a neighbor boy's father was a member of the **Ku Klux Klan**, she sat on top of the fence separating the two properties and taunted the boy. Her father put a quick stop to that, explaining the dangers of what she was doing. For the next few weeks, her father guarded their home with a shotgun as members of the Ku Klux Klan passed by on their way to their meeting place at an old mine nearby. However, Murray decided to befriend the boy after the boy got into a fight and Murray stepped in to help him. They were friends from then on.

Another incident happened at school when she "whipped a girl with a roofing shingle for calling her a 'n-----'." Although she didn't know the ugly history of that word, she thought the girl was cussing at her. Murray mostly liked school, but not history class. She did not appreciate that African Americans and American Indians never seemed to "win." Murray did not attend high school, but that was not unusual at that time.

When she was 15, Murray moved to Bloomington. According to her oral history, Murray found Bloomington more segregated and more prejudiced. At first she lived with her sister, who was married with a newborn baby. Later, their mother moved to town, and Murray and her mother lived together. When she was 17, Murray had a son, her only child, named Carroll Alexander.

On April 23, 1936, Ethel married William James Murray at the Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church; she was 18, he was 20. They lived in Bloomington and then Peoria, where William drove a truck. Sadly, William died by 1943, and Murray and her son were back living in Bloomington. Ten years later, Murray began "going together" with Reginald Whittaker. The couple was together for over 30 years until Whittaker's death.

Murray generally worked as a housekeeper, often on day jobs. Once, she worked for a local teacher as a maid. She worked every day, apart from Thursday afternoons, for \$6 a week. One Sunday she arrived at the home to discover the family had company, and she was expected to prepare and serve breakfast to about ten people. When the family and guests went into the living room to listen to a radio broadcast of the Southernaires, an African American gospel vocal **quartet**, Murray heard her employer's mother say, "It's time for the 'Darkies' to sing." Already upset, Murray threw down her dish towel and walked out. When the lady called later to find out what happened, Murray suggested she get "one of her white 'darkies' to do it." Although she quit that job, the lady never gave her a bad reference.

Around 1952, Murray began working for Herb and Mary Lou Kennedy at their home on Grant Road in Bloomington. Mary Lou had so much confidence in Murray that she would let her use her **credit** and her car. Eventually the Kennedys bought Murray her own car. They even replaced the first one they bought when it turned out to be a "**lemon.**"

After the Kennedys moved to Florida, Murray worked for Henry Loomis, president of Industrial Casualty Insurance Company. She cleaned his home during the day and his downtown Bloomington office in the evenings. After repeatedly finding messes left by the agents after their meetings, Murray reached her limit. One night she just walked out without cleaning. The next morning she went to the Loomis home, and she and H.L. (as his friends called him) had a talk. In her own words, she said, “we sat and we talked, and he cussed and I cussed... We had coffee. We drank that whole pot of coffee. And so then I left, and he didn’t say he would or he wouldn’t. But I left. I went back down to the office, finished cleaning. I felt good about myself because I told him exactly how I felt, and so come the next Saturday they (the insurance agents) were meeting, everything was (left) straight.”

Raised as a Methodist, Murray began practicing the **Baha’i** faith about 1953. Baha’i is a religion that emphasizes the equality of all people. With Whittaker, she visited the Baha’i Temple in Wilmette, Illinois and found it “breathtaking and overwhelming.” They attended meetings in Champaign and Peoria, and Murray later hosted them in her home. She was a member of Baha’i through most of the 1980s, but later began attending the Loving Missionary Baptist Church in Bloomington.

Murray also had a strong sense of civic values and was very active in the African American community, particularly the Civic Women’s Club (“a club that’s purpose was to bring African American women of the community together to stimulate a greater interest in Civic and Social Contact”) and the Three C Club (a social club that brought local women together to discuss issues that regularly affected African Americans). Murray held multiple offices in these clubs.

In the 1970s Murray went to work as a Nutrition Program Assistant through the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. She visited people in their homes to help them create diets and menus. Murray was named “Homemaker of the Year” in 1977. She then went on to work as a Home Coordinator for Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and then as a Home Interventionist helping families solve their problems. Her last job was with The Children’s Foundation working to support children and families. She died on September 8, 1990 at the age of 73 and is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

**Discussion Question:** How did Ethel Murray’s personality affect her career, in both positive and negative ways?