



MICHIGAN CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION

Statement on the Life and Contributions of DAISY ELLIOTT

On the occasion of our first meeting since her passing on December 22, 2015, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission pays tribute to a woman who was one of the greatest civil rights leaders this state has ever produced. Daisy Elliott's spirit and the scope of her accomplishments were perhaps best described by the Michigan Chronicle who called her a "gentle warrior" and credited her with being one of our "most prolific standard bearers for justice and equality."

Daisy Elizabeth Lenoir, the sixth of eight children, was born on November 26, 1917, in Filbert, West Virginia to Robert and Daisy Dorum Lenoir, a coal miner and a homemaker. When Daisy was quite young, her family moved to Beckley, West Virginia. First in Filbert and later in Beckley, Daisy's parents provided the family with a modest but nurturing and supportive home life in which the value of education was emphasized.

In 1936 at age 17 and only a few months after her graduation from Stratton High School, Daisy married Robert Elliott. Together they had one child, Doris Mae, in 1938. The Elliotts then followed the migration pattern of many African Americans of the period who were moving north and west in pursuit of better opportunities for their families. Early in the 1940s the Elliotts moved to Michigan and then to California where both held wartime factory jobs. Daisy worked first as a "Rosie the Riveter" and later as an inspector.

By 1950, Daisy and Robert were divorced and she had returned to Detroit. Daisy took classes both in California and Detroit, graduating from the Detroit Institute of Commerce in 1950. During the 1950s, Daisy sold real estate and worked in a Detroit branch office of the Michigan Secretary of State, rising to become the office's assistant manager. In 1964 she married Charles Bowers with whom she shared her life until his passing. Together they travelled to many countries around the world. Daisy continued taking classes at Wayne State University and received an Honorary Doctor of Ministry from the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit.

Daisy Elliott will be remembered most by this Commission and by generations to come for her accomplishments in the world of politics. Her life experiences, particularly during World War II and in its immediate aftermath, convinced her of the need for action if African Americans were ever to have equal access to social and economic opportunities. In particular, she believed pressure must be brought to bear on labor unions and the federal government to fight job discrimination, and she vowed to be a catalyst for change. She first became involved in civic organizations, but soon realized that achieving equal opportunity required changing Michigan law, and she turned her attention to the political process. She became active in the Michigan Democratic Party and from 1957 to 1959 she served as president of the Michigan Federal Democratic Clubs.

If not for her leadership at a pivotal moment in Michigan history, it is likely that our state's singular civil rights landscape would look very different. In 1961 Daisy Elliott was one of only eleven women, along with 133 men, elected to the Michigan Constitutional Convention. There she played a key role in discussions of civil rights, and she was instrumental in ensuring that the state's new Constitution would establish a Michigan Civil Rights Commission with authority to investigate charges of discrimination based on race, religion, color, or national origin and to enforce anti-discrimination laws. The Constitution was voted upon on April 1, 1963 and took effect January 1, 1964. This Commission remains the only such institution in the country enshrined in a state's constitution.

Having achieved the constitutional protections, Daisy Elliott next turned her steadfast commitment to civil rights for all to the legislative process. Her perseverance and foresight protected and raised the constitutional promise of civil rights to become the statutorily enforceable and powerful bedrock principle that prohibits the disparate treatment of Michiganders.

First elected in 1962, Daisy Elliott served in the Michigan State Legislature for nearly 20 years during which she was a powerful and effective voice for equality. She chaired important committees – she was the first woman to chair the House Labor committee – sponsored significant legislation, and she was instrumental in the creation of the Legislative Black Caucus. She was an effective and eloquent civil rights advocate, particularly for workers, senior citizens, women, and minorities, and the importance of education; she sponsored or co-sponsored more than 80 laws that were enacted by the legislature.

And she was relentlessly persistent. Her greatest and best-known achievement is the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act (ELCRA) of 1977, a bill she first introduced in 1962.

ELCRA specifically covered the areas of employment, housing, education and public accommodation, and in addition to race it added prohibitions against discrimination based on sex, weight, height, age, or marital status. ELCRA protected a person's right to file a discrimination suit in court, while also ensuring the existence of an administrative avenue for those who could or chose not to hire counsel and go to court. The State Bar of Michigan commemorated the enactment of ELCRA in 2012, naming it a Michigan Legal Milestone.

Mel Larsen, the other half of the Elliott-Larsen team and the bipartisan key to its passage, makes it clear that "Daisy was a real motivating force and driver of that legislation." Larsen described Elliott as "a heck of a role model for those who were in the civil rights movement at that time – and out front." Family and friends recall Elliott working in Michigan with Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and other nationally-known civil rights figures of the day.

Lawmakers who served with Daisy Elliott remember her as both a quiet, gracious woman and an unflinching advocate who fiercely opposed discrimination of any kind. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder praised Ms. Elliott's legacy saying, "She showed tremendous leadership during challenging times, tirelessly working to end discrimination. Representative Elliott knew that Michigan would be a better place if all people were treated fairly. And because of her, we are a better place, even as we continue to discuss new ways to bring us together rather than keep us apart. That is a proud legacy."

The Rev. Dr. Wendell Anthony, president of the Detroit Branch NAACP, the largest in the country, described Daisy Elliott as a "political warrior." He said, "We are better because of Daisy Elliott. Civil Rights are broader and our humanity runs deeper. She made her mark. Let us all work as she did, and make our own!"

The Michigan Women's Hall of Fame, on the 50th anniversary of the Michigan Constitution in 2013, inducted the "Con-Con Eleven," recognizing that Ms. Elliott, together with the ten women with whom she served, represent the "first and only time women participated in the writing of a Michigan constitution." The Michigan Civil Rights Commission urges the Hall to take this opportunity to also induct Daisy Elliott as an individual, in recognition of her numerous other contributions to the people of this state.

The Michigan Civil Rights Commission can find no better way to express our respect, admiration, gratefulness and sense of loss than to echo the words of Daisy Elliott's granddaughter Badriyyah Sabree, in a statement on behalf of herself and Daisy's three great-grandchildren, Aliyah, Adam and Yusuf:

"While we mourn the loss of this marvelous woman, we also celebrate her extraordinary life and hope that it serves as an example to people around the world to selflessly work to ensure all people are provided rights to full legal, social and economic equality."



Adopted on the 25th day of January, 2016, by the **MICHIGAN CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION**

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