

Ruth Ellis Continues to Fight Racism

by Gloria Esguerra Melencio



By the time Ruth Charlotte Ellis celebrated her 101st birthday last 23 July, she had become the oldest living “out” Black feminist in the history, rather herstory, of the women’s movement. Those 101 years had been spent working, fighting, dancing, laughing, and loving. Could a woman ask for more?

Born in 1899 in Illinois, USA, Ruth was the youngest of four children and the only girl. Her mother died when she was very young. Her father, the first Coloured mail courier in the state, sent all of his children to school. Ruth’s brothers play the piano, violin and the guitar. She likewise plays the guitar and excels in dancing.

Ruthie, as she signs her name in her personal letters, says her being Black has caused her a lot of pain, struggles and troubles. The turn of the 20th century was one of the most turbulent times in American history, and she witnessed how Blacks were hated, maimed, lynched and killed because of the colour of their skin.

Her childhood was filled with memories of discrimination and racial segregation. Blacks were denied entry to theatres, except for one opera house who let them in, but only on condition that they stayed in the farthest gallery. “The children called it peanut heaven,” she chuckles. All the good eating places refused to accept Black customers, she continues, and the only one where they could go was a



Ruth and her brothers

short-order restaurant—
“but it served only chili!”

Ruth went to a mixed school where the Coloured pupils did not have the opportunities that the White children had. Denied participation in any team activities, they could only look on with envy during baseball, football or swimming practice. Black children had to go to the Sangamon River, a dangerous place where some of them had already drowned, to enjoy playing in the water. She herself, like many of her friends, never learned to swim or engage in other sports because of segregation.

Barely nine years old, Ruth witnessed the Springfield Riot of 1908 where anti-Black hatred, fanned by yellow journalism, spread like wildfire. For 40 horrible hours, houses owned by Blacks were set ablaze. Not a single one was spared. The only ones that were not burned were those that had white handkerchiefs tied outside, apparently to signify that these were owned by Whites.

In the video film of her life titled “Living With Pride: Ruth Ellis@100,” the “foremother” of Black

lesbians narrates that her father and three brothers know she is gay. It was after she moved to Detroit, a city in another state, that she set up a business, the Ellis and Franklin Printing Company, together with her partner Ceciline Franklin.

Ruth and Ceciline, whom she called Babe, built their own home in Detroit and lived together for 30 years. “She was the only woman I lived with,” Ruth confides. This home became known as the “Gay Spot,” a place where gays could gather to talk, drink and just be together. Almost every weekend, she recalls, the fun would begin with an outdoor barbecue and then later everyone would sing and dance through the night.

Ruth has bittersweet memories of Babe. They were exact opposites: while Ruth loved to dance and listen to classical music, Babe preferred to drink and stay out most of the night. Their relationship ended when Ruth decided she finally wanted an end to her partner’s having another relationship.

Celebrating her birthday at 101 is an

accomplishment. Her advocacy for senior and lesbian rights has given birth to organisations that benefit numerous women. She still gets invitations to share her views and experiences, and friends volunteer to drive, read and write for her (she has poor eyesight).

Today, Ruth lives independently in her apartment in Detroit. And she still dances, by the way.

Postscript:

Ruth was hospitalized after this story was written. Doctors had various unclear diagnosis as to her ailment. After two weeks, she was in big smiles when she stepped out of the hospital. Her community has been taking turns in minding her 24 hours a day in her apartment. Sarah B. Uhle, one of Ruth’s closest friends who treats Ruth as her grandmother, wrote to Isis saying “she is sleeping more and more and has expressed anger that she keeps waking up. She’s very ready to go and seems very peaceful about it.”

Indeed, Ruth passed away peacefully in the early morning of 5 October 2000. She had gone full circle and lived a full life.

Goodbye, Ruthie.

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