



Ellis, Ruth (1899-2000)

by Linda Rapp

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Ruth Ellis.
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Small of stature but great of heart, Ruth Ellis became an icon of the glbtq community in Detroit, where she lived for most of her 101 years. Out, proud, generous, and plain-speaking, she lived life on her own terms with determination and dignity. The Ruth Ellis Center continues her legacy of offering shelter and support to young glbtq people.

Ruth Ellis was a witness to history. She came within a few months of living through the entire twentieth century with its remarkable changes for glbtq people, African-Americans, and women, but she also had profound ties to the nineteenth. Her father, Charles Ellis, was born a slave in Tennessee. He eventually settled in Springfield, Illinois and became the first black postal carrier in the state.

Charles Ellis married Carrie Farrell, another Tennessee native, and the couple had three sons. On July 23, 1899, Carrie Ellis delivered twin girls at home. One infant did not survive; the other, Ruth Charlotte, became a centenarian.

Ruth Ellis learned about bigotry early in her life when a race riot erupted in Springfield in the summer of 1908 after a black man was accused--falsely, as it turned out--of raping a white woman. Many black families fled when rioters announced the intention to burn their homes, but the Ellises remained, with Charles Ellis standing guard downstairs with the ceremonial sword that he owned as a member of the benevolent society of the Knights of Pythias. The violence went on for two days before the National Guard was able to quell it. The Ellis family and their home came through the ordeal safely.

Carrie Ellis died of a stroke when her daughter was twelve, and her widower was left to raise the children as a single parent. He did not want his young daughter to socialize with boys because, he told her, "boys and books don't go together." She did not view this as a privation.

Ellis attended Springfield public schools. African-American students were distinctly in the minority at her "white school" and did not receive much encouragement. Ellis described herself as bashful in her school days, but it seems more likely that she was intimidated.

"I didn't mix very well with the white girls. Or they didn't mix with me. In gym class, the teacher would have to hold my hand because some of the girls didn't want to hold hands with someone Black," stated Ellis.

A gym teacher at Springfield High School was one of her first crushes.

Having recognized her attraction to other women, Ellis recalled, "I used to fool around with girls and have them stay all night. One morning, my Daddy said, 'Next time y'all make that much noise, I'm going to put you BOTH out.'"

Homosexuality was never an issue that was discussed in the family, but, Ellis said in 1997, "I think [my father] was kind of glad that I had a woman instead of a man because he was afraid I'd come home with a

baby. If you had a baby in those days, you'd have to leave home. And he wanted me home."

Ellis believed that her eldest brother, Charles Ellis, Jr., a World War I veteran who never married, was also gay, but "he never talked about it or anything like that."

Ellis graduated from Springfield High School in 1919 and went to work as a nursemaid and cook for a local family. She subsequently got a job at a print shop, where she learned how to set type and operate the presses.

In 1937, one of her brothers, who was living in Detroit, suggested that Ellis could earn more money there than in Springfield, and so she boarded a Greyhound bus and moved north.

She was soon joined by Ceceline "Babe" Franklin, whom she called her "one real girlfriend" and "the only person I had ever lived with." Franklin had promised Ellis that "if you ever leave Springfield, I'll come where you are," and she was true to her word.

Franklin took a job as a cook in a restaurant, and Ellis went to work for a printer for a time before deciding to go into business for herself. She and Franklin bought a two-family flat in Detroit and devoted the front room to the print shop. Much of Ellis's business came from local churches for which she printed coin envelopes and raffle tickets. She would also "take the walk-in trade" from neighborhood businesses and private customers requiring posters, fliers, or stationery. A self-taught photographer, she set up a darkroom in the former coal-bin of the house and offered the service of making hand-colored prints.

To further supplement their income, Ellis and Franklin rented the other flat to "a gay fellow."

Gay men and lesbians had little visibility at the time, and opportunities for socializing were extremely limited. "It was a hush-hush thing when I was coming up," stated Ellis.

She and Franklin opened their home to other lesbians and gay men, giving parties to which "people used to come from everyplace" and earning their house on Oakland Avenue a reputation as "the gay spot."

"On weekends, that would be the place to come because there weren't many places unless it was in someone's home. So they'd come down, and we'd play the piano and dance, and some of them would play cards," recalled Ellis in 1998. Gay men and lesbians came from as far away as Flint, Michigan and Cleveland, Ohio to attend the gatherings because they felt welcome in Ellis and Franklin's home.

The two women were an unlikely pair. "We were just two opposite people. Sometimes opposites attract. That was our case," explained Ellis. "She liked to drink, go to bars, gamble. I never did all that. Mine was concerts and things like that, going to church and church things."

Despite their differences, the couple stayed together for more than thirty years. "That's what I want these girls to do now, instead of breaking up after two or three months," declared Ellis.

In the early 1970s, Franklin moved to the suburb of Southfield to be nearer her job, but Ellis, who never learned to drive, chose to remain in Detroit. Even after the couple stopped living together, though, said Ellis, "I had a key to her place, and I could come and go as I wanted."

Franklin died in 1975. Ellis had meanwhile moved into the downtown Wolverine Senior Center, where, because of her ebullient personality, she quickly befriended other residents and then helped them out by going grocery shopping and running errands for them.

At the age of seventy-nine, Ellis enrolled in a self-defense class taught by a woman, Jay Spiro, who she correctly suspected was a lesbian. Spiro, the first white lesbian whom Ellis had met, introduced her to a community of younger gay women, who immediately embraced her.

"They took me to bars. We went from one bar to another," recounted Ellis. "Then it just kept snowballing" as she began engaging in more and more glbtq and feminist activities. She became an admired and respected member of Detroit's glbtq community. "She was our inspiration and our link to the past," commented Kofi Adoma, for whom Ellis was both a friend and a role model. "When we listened to Ruth's stories, we knew we should also be able to accomplish things and not have fear."

Ellis's new friends were quick to volunteer to drive her wherever she needed to go, and they raised money to send her to a conference in California on issues faced by gay and lesbian African Americans. She began to enjoy traveling, making annual trips to Provincetown, Massachusetts and to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. She took other trips around the country as well, including a 1999 jaunt to San Francisco, where she led the annual Dyke March and was serenaded by thousands of women singing "Happy Birthday" in honor of her centennial.

The once-shy schoolgirl also became a public speaker, addressing community and school groups and forums at the University of Michigan, Wayne State University, and Michigan State University. She imparted several messages to her audiences, the first of which was that they should be proud of and honest about themselves. In her case, stated Ellis, "I was always out of the closet. I didn't have to come out."

She also encouraged students to engage with older people--to get to know at least one, to be a true, generous, and respectful friend to the person, and to benefit from learning about his or her individual story.

That story, she explained--or perhaps warned them--could include lifelong experiences of sexuality, however imponderable that seemed to the young. Students at MSU appeared nonplussed by the mere presence of such an elderly person, let alone one who frankly stated that she had enjoyed a sexual encounter at the age of ninety-five.

Ellis was a lifelong church-goer despite the fact that "back in my time gays were sort of ostracized." She lived long enough to see some progress, however, and some hope for the future: "My church had a gay day, with a gay guest minister. When a preacher explains why we're just like anybody else, they hear that, and maybe afterward they'll have a different thought about us."

Ellis is the subject of Yvonne Welbon's award-winning documentary film *Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis at 100* (1999). The two women met in 1996 when Ellis had traveled to Bloomington, Indiana for the National Women's Music Festival and Welbon spotted her at a dance for women of color and was immediately drawn to the sprightly nonagenarian who was dancing the night away.

For the next couple of years Welbon interviewed and filmed Ellis at her home in Detroit and at the annual Golden Threads festival for older lesbians and gay men in Provincetown. Her film combines archival footage with recreations of the events of Ellis's life to tell her story.

When *Living with Pride* premiered in San Francisco, the diminutive Ellis--who stood only four feet eight inches tall--blossomed as a big star. All three screenings of the film played to sold-out audiences, and after each show, women thronged around Ellis, eager for the chance to meet and talk with her.

Also in 1999, Ellis presided at the ribbon-cutting ceremony to open the Ruth Ellis Center, a haven for homeless glbtq youth in Detroit. "We really did model the agency after the legacy of her unselfishness in

giving to young people," stated Executive Director Grace McClelland.

The facility offers a Drop-In Center, the Ruth's House Emergency Shelter, and the Ruth's House Transitional Living Program, an eighteen-month course in independent-living skills for people aged sixteen to twenty-one.

The Street Outreach Program, developed in 2003-2004, has been highly successful in bringing young people into the Center, where they can not only have their basic needs for food, shelter, and hygiene met, but can also receive education about HIV/AIDS and other diseases and can be paired with a mentor to help them develop pride and self-esteem and to become self-sufficient.

Because of heart problems, Ellis spent two weeks in the hospital in the fall of 2000. She wanted to live out her days at home, however, and so she returned to her apartment, where she was attended around the clock by loving friends until she died in her sleep on October 5.

Ellis always insisted, "I'm just an ordinary little woman . . . I'm not that important," but those whom she helped and inspired with her generous spirit, her determination, and her zest for living surely believed otherwise.

Ellis knew the importance of remembering the past and learning from it, but she never stopped looking to the future. In an interview in *The Advocate* in April 2000, she stressed the need for lesbians and gay men to work with each other for equality: "The only way we can get anyplace is by being together."

When asked for her thoughts on "gay people in the twenty-first century," she stated, "Gay people have to get in there just like anybody else. We have to work. We need more businesses. Scientists, chemists, things like that. If we could get more gay people in our politics, I think it would help a lot."

Ellis concluded with advice for young people: "I hope you get a good education. And be honest and caring. Try to love people. Have a happy life if you can in this crazy world."

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