

Eva Jones (1930-1987)

Eva Mae Gaiter Jones was born in Frenchmans Bayou, Arkansas on March 15, 1930. Her parents, James and Tommie Lee Dearing Gaiter, moved to Bloomington in 1944 when Jones was 14 years old. She attended Bloomington High School where she was known as “Pee Wee”. In the 1948 *Aepix* yearbook, she chose the quote, “tho’ she is little she is mighty” to describe herself. This determination to succeed engendered an interest in politics and local public affairs; she would engage in these pursuits throughout her life. Though not radical and outspoken enough for some, Jones broke a barrier in Bloomington politics and distinguished herself as a person of high principle.

After graduating from Cortez Business College in Chicago she married and bore seven children. As her children grew to adulthood, Jones worked as a telephone operator and took pride in her professional demeanor. One friend stated, “She was a vibrant, friendly person and it was easy to like her. Later, I came to admire her drive and perseverance as she became more involved in community affairs.”

Attempting to land a seat on the Bloomington city council in a crowded field of ten candidates, Jones ran for office in 1970. This effort proved unsuccessful. In 1971 she was elected to the Bloomington District 87 Board of Education, the first African American to hold a board seat and the only woman. She was elected to the board presidency in 1977 and held that office for one year.

Jones’ term began one year after the only teachers’ strike in District 87 history. The period of the 1970s was one of the most unpleasant eras in the history of the District. Animosity between teachers, administrators, and board members was intense. Even within each group differences of opinion appeared and it took many years before labor strife eased in the district.

Using her experience in District 87 politics, Jones ran again for public office in 1979. Opposition to her candidacy came from both White and Black members of the community; Whites because of traditional racism, Blacks because many thought she was “selling out” to the established order. She successfully overcame these obstacles to become the first African American to be elected to the Bloomington City Council.

In addition to her elected positions, Jones worked on several local projects such as organizing a West side Baseball League for children from low-income families, serving on the YWCA board, the League of Women Voters, the United Way, several professional organizations and church positions at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church. In 1983 she received the Bloomington-Normal Human Relations Award for her involvement in local civic and governmental affairs, an organization that she helped establish. Also in 1983 she was one of eight people statewide to receive the Illinois Municipal Human Relations Association’s annual award. Throughout all her civic activities, she continued to work at Firestone Tire and Rubber Co.

On July 19, 1987 Eva Jones died of cancer at the age of 57. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.