

RUTH ELLIS

b. July 23, 1899

d. October 5, 2000

Ruth Ellis lived to be 101. She is credited with being the oldest known lesbian and GLBT civil rights activist.

“I never expected I’d be 100 years old. It didn’t even come to my mind.”

Ruth Ellis, who lived to be 101, was credited with being the oldest known lesbian and GLBT civil rights activist.

Ellis was born in Springfield, Illinois, at the end of the 19th century—the youngest of four children and the only girl. Her parents were born in Tennessee during the last years of slavery. Ellis’s father was the first African-American mail carrier in Springfield.

Ellis attended Springfield High School at a time when very few African-Americans enrolled in secondary education. She was aware of her sexual orientation by the time she was 16. Ellis remembered her high school gym teacher as her first female attraction.

In the early 1920’s, Ellis met Ceciline “Babe” Franklin. They became friends and lovers for more than 35 years.

When Ellis moved to Detroit in the 1930’s, Babe joined her. The couple bought a house and Ellis started a printing business. She was the first woman in Michigan to own and operate a printing company.

Their house became the local hangout for African-American gays and lesbians. Known as the “gay spot,” Ellis opened her home for parties and dances, and never turned down a gay or lesbian friend who needed a place to stay.

In the latter part of her life, Ellis became a well-known figure in the GLBT community, first locally, then nationally. She attended events and programs across the country, often as a speaker or special guest. She enjoyed dancing and socializing, even in her old age.

In 1999, Ellis’s life was made the subject of the documentary “Living With Pride: Ruth C. Ellis @ 100,” directed by Yvonne Welbon. The film was screened at film festivals worldwide, and won the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the San Francisco International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1999.

Ellis lived in three centuries; she passed away in 2000. The Ruth Ellis Center honors her life and is dedicated to serving homeless GLBT youth and young adults.

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