

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

DR. ELSIE AUSTIN: SPEAKING OUT FOR JUSTICE

Imagine that a group of angry men broke down your door and threatened to shoot you. When Elsie Austin was growing up, she learned that her great-grandmother Louisa faced that very situation.

The hooded men of the Ku Klux Klan, who hated African Americans, were looking for Louisa's husband. He was an ex-slave who had been elected to a government office. Louisa told the men they could kill her, but she would never give in to their demands. Unable to scare Louisa, they finally left. Elsie always remembered her great-grandmother's courage.

Elsie was born in 1908. She attended an elementary school where all the students were black, and she learned about African history. But at high school in Cincinnati, Ohio, Elsie was one of very few African Americans.

ELSIE'S COURAGE

One day, Elsie's teacher read from a history book that all races made great contributions to the world, except Africans. All eyes were on Elsie. She recalls, "I remembered my grandmother . . . I felt as if I was standing there with the guns trained on me . . . I stood up and said, 'I was taught . . .



Far Left: Elsie Austin at about the age she took a brave stand in her classroom.

Left: Elsie (middle, with frame) at the first Bahá'í Convention in Tunisia, Africa, in 1956.

Below: In her work and her life, Elsie actively defended race unity.

that Africans worked iron before Europeans knew anything about it. I was taught that they knew how to cast bronze in making statues, and that they worked in gold and in ivory so beautifully that the European nations came to their shores to buy their carvings and statues . . . There was an electrical silence."

Her teacher apologized and supported Elsie's statements.

A PASSION FOR ONENESS

Elsie became the first African American woman to graduate from the University of Cincinnati's College of Law. She started an impressive legal career. But after years of dealing with racism, Elsie questioned God and religion. Her father encouraged her to look into the Bahá'í Faith. Inspired by what she learned, Elsie became a Bahá'í.



Elsie soon devoted her courage and passion to sharing Bahá'u'lláh's vision of oneness. She educated and encouraged Bahá'ís in many countries, including the United States, Morocco, Nigeria, Kenya, the Bahamas, and Israel.

When Elsie died in 2004, the Universal House of Justice wrote, "the shining example of her sacrificial life will remain a source of inspiration to her fellow believers for generations to come."