

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

Dr. Elsie Austin (1908–2004)



Elsie Austin was one of only two black students in her high school class in Ohio, U.S. One day, her teacher read from a textbook that Africans had played no important role in history and were inferior to other races. Everyone stared at the black students.

Elsie spoke up. She said that Africans had worked with iron and bronze long before Europeans, and they crafted beautiful ivory sculptures. "There was an electric silence," Elsie recalled. But her teacher agreed with her and shared other contributions by African Americans.

Elsie learned gumption from her family. Once, the racist group, the Ku Klux Klan, broke into her great-grandmother's house. They pointed guns at her and demanded to know where her husband was. She looked them in the eye and said, "Go ahead and kill me, because I will never tell you where he is." They eventually gave up and left.

"I was awed and inspired by that story," Elsie said, "by her courage, a lone woman in a hostile, dangerous environment—and her determination not to give in to injustice and oppression, even at the risk of death."

Education and Leadership

Elsie carried that courageous spirit into her adult life. She was the first black female graduate of the University of Cincinnati Law School in 1930. She later became the first black female Assistant Attorney General for Ohio.

Elsie was frustrated by religions that fought with each other and acted with prejudice. She told her father that she was giving up on religion. He had

heard of the local Bahá'ís and their mission of unity, and he encouraged Elsie to talk to them.

For two years, Elsie studied the Faith. She found African-American speakers and musicians for a race amity conference in 1935. Afterward, she became a Bahá'í. She wrote that the Faith "begins with that essential spiritual regeneration of the human being which creates a heart for brotherhood and impels action for the unity of mankind."

In 1946, Elsie was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly, the governing council of the U.S. Bahá'ís. She served for seven years.

Service Around the World

In 1953, Elsie moved to Morocco to help establish the Bahá'í community in that part of Africa. She said that through such an experience, "You begin to understand how much oneness there is with humanity and how much people in other parts of the world are going through the same experiences that you go through in your homeland."

In 1960, Elsie became a Foreign Service Officer, working with cultural and educational programs of the U.S. Information Agency in Nigeria and Kenya. She started the agency's first women's activities programs in Africa.

Elsie continued to speak and write about the Faith until her passing in 2004 at age 96. The U.S. National Spiritual Assembly praised her "natural, unaffected dignity, and a sincere, loving interest in the doings of her fellow humans . . ." The Universal House of Justice wrote that her "shining example . . . will remain a source of inspiration to her fellow believers for generations to come."