

Ella Mae Wade Brayboy: The Godmother of Voter Registration

The late Ella Mae Wade Brayboy was a legend in voter registration in Georgia.

In 1964, the Atlanta native became one of Georgia's first African American deputy voter registrars. She registered a record 20,000 black voters during that decade.

Her life was consumed by activism. She worked as a congressional aide to former U.S. Rep. Andrew Young. Former Gov. Joe Frank Harris appointed her to one of the first commissions to oversee the annual Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. She was director of community affairs for the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for 15 years.

"She is known as the Godmother of voter registration," Kerry Ramsey of Atlanta said. "She worked with the SCLC and Dr. King's voter registration drive. That gives you an idea of how far back she goes."

Mrs. Brayboy's health had declined in recent years, and she passed away of natural causes in 2010 at 92 years old. The funeral was held at Central United Methodist Church, where she was an active and devoted member. Mrs. Brayboy served in many leadership positions within the church and community.

Mrs. Brayboy graduated from Booker T. Washington High, where she later helped place the school on the National Register of Historic Places. One of her teachers encouraged her activism. "He saw I was interested in civic matters," she said in a 2000 interview, "and would take us downtown to see how government works. Sometimes, we'd stand out in the pouring rain, just taking it in."

Due to her efforts, Central United Methodist Church is listed on the national register of historic places under the Atlanta University umbrella.

She worked downtown at Rich's Magnolia Room when she decided to get involved with the voters' rights movement. Decades of civic activism and advocacy for the under-served followed.

As chair of the Resource Development for the Fulton County Council on Aging, she succeeded in getting seniors half-price taxi fares. She played a role in establishing a geriatric clinic at Grady Hospital. She had a hand in replacing the state's centralized balloting system with voting precincts. As a MARTA consultant, she helped decide what neighborhoods the transit would go through. Mrs. Brayboy also helped residents in the Pittsburgh community get indoor plumbing, electricity, and natural gas service.

Through the years, Mrs. Brayboy's work has been honored by churches, civic groups, and politicians. She received the YWCA's 1988 Women of Achievement Award. The Atlanta Million Man March 1998 organizing committee paid tribute to her and other seniors. Mrs. Brayboy retired from the King Center in 1995. In 2017, The City of Atlanta dedicated a park in her name, The Ella Mae Wade Brayboy Memorial Park, on the city's west side.

A collection of her clippings, correspondence, photos, and other documents are archived at the Auburn Avenue Research Library.

"She had an unyielding moral compass," Mr. Ramsey said.

Story written by Rick Badie, Atlanta Journal-Constitution