

Dr. Charles Edward Morris (1931-2024)

Dr. Charles Morris was a Civil Rights pioneer in McLean County. After his arrival in Bloomington-Normal in 1966 when he began teaching at Illinois State University, he and his wife Jeanne fought discrimination in housing and other areas of life in their new home. Charles and Jeanne worked hard to make life better for students and for members of the entire Bloomington-Normal community.

Charles Edward Morris, Jr. was born on September 30, 1931, in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, the son of Charles E. and Verta (Warner) Morris. He was an exceptional student, graduating from high school at the age of 16 and was valedictorian of his class. He then went on to attend Swift Memorial Junior College, graduating as salutatorian in 1948, and then graduated cum laude from Johnson C. Smith University (a historically black college) in Charlotte, North Carolina with a B.S. in Mathematics.

It was while attending Swift that he met his future wife, Jeanne Brown. Jeanne attended Spelman College, a historically black college in Atlanta, Georgia. Each summer for two years Charles and Jeanne worked at the same resort on Squam Lake in New Hampshire. A relationship blossomed as they worked together. And every September, they went their separate ways, returning to their respective universities. They “kept in touch” as they finished undergraduate degrees and married in 1957. They lived in High Point, North Carolina for a year while Charles taught high school before moving to Champaign-Urbana when Charles was awarded a National Science Foundation Institute Fellowship at the University of Illinois.¹

When the couple arrived in Champaign-Urbana, the couple avoided a housing discrimination event because a block of apartments to house all the fellows had been acquired by the NSF Institute Director. Charles felt they were fortunate because “We didn’t have to face the problem of looking for housing.” Later, Charles and Jeanne became active in a successful open housing campaign and were able to rent a house in Urbana their last year there. In the summer of 1966, Charles received a Ph.D. in Mathematics and Jeanne a master’s degree in Education. Charles then accepted a position as an Associate Professor of Mathematics at Illinois State University and the Morris family, including children David and Lyn, moved to Normal.

The Morrises were not surprised that acquiring suitable housing was an immediate problem in their new town. Richard Watts, pastor of Normal’s First Presbyterian Church whom they knew at McKinley Church in Champaign, proactively alerted local attorney Robert Lenz in anticipation of the Morrises needing legal assistance to find housing. Charles recalled, “We were denied access to several houses listed for sale.” In a 2023 interview, Charles recounted that one owner met him and Jeanne at the driveway and told them “No, go away.”² Fortunately, they found one on Wilmette Drive which they liked. According to his wife Jeanne, the owner of that house lived out-of-town and had no interest in retaining the property. Charles remembered that “the situation had its sad and angry moments. It was rumored that we had been hired by the NAACP to purchase a house and “run the neighborhood down.” Fortunately for the Morrises, “there were more families in the neighborhood supportive of open housing than those opposing.” And so, they bought their house. Charles and Jeanne were grateful to have been supported by

¹ “Dr. Charles E. Morris, Jr.” obituary, <https://www.kiblerbradyruestman.com/obituaries/Charles-Edward-Morris?obid=32680392>, Date Accessed January 26, 2026.

² Stock, Eric. “Charles Morris of Bloomington remembered for decades-long fight for racial justice,” WGLT, August 24, 2024, <https://www.wglt.org/local-news/2024-08-24/charles-morris-of-bloomington-remembered-for-decades-long-fight-for-racial-justice>, Date Accessed January 26, 2026.

equal opportunity advocates like Jim and Gwen Pruyne and Ralph and Ellen Smith during those early years.

Charles and Jeanne worked hard to improve the quality of life for black students at ISU. It was a difficult time to be a black student at ISU. “Black students felt prejudice on two fronts – for being Black in a white town, and for being college students in a town with an uneasy relationship with its college.”³ In the early 1970s the Morrises collaborated with the Lenzes, Pohlmanns, and Plummers to address the lack of off-campus housing available to black students. According to Charles, their “group bought houses near campus” and rented them to black students. In 1984, Charles assisted ISU students in chartering the Nu Psi Lambda alumni chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity inc., which was the first fraternity established for black men in the United States in 1906.⁴ Charles was very instrumental in the lives of countless students. One former student and member of Alpha Phi Alpha, Eta Tau Chapter stated, “I can’t tell you how many brothers stated how Dr. Morris greatly helped them and made a difference in them staying in school.”

Charles and Jeanne also donated generously to the social justice library in the ISU Multi-Cultural Center which opened in 2021. They gave the center books and pictures to ensure that students and visitors would continue to learn and research Black history. Charles spent hours documenting his and his wife’s family ancestry, and he wanted black students to be able to learn from his work to hopefully inspire them to do the same. The Multi-Cultural Center named the library after the Morrises in appreciation of their work and contributions.⁵

When Charles and Jeanne arrived at ISU, minority students and faculty had a very small presence on campus. In his first year, Charles was one of three black professors at ISU. As his career evolved at the university, Charles directed NSF-funded programs in Mathematics, served as the Interim Director of the High Potential Students Program, and was elected first Chairperson of the ISU Academic Senate. He served as Secretary of the University, Vice President for Administrative Services, and retired from the position of Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs with the Illinois Board of Regents, while retaining faculty status with ISU and associate-status with the Center for Mathematics, Science and Technology and the Center for the Study of Education Policy.⁶

After retiring, Charles was the Coordinator of SIMaST (Students Integrating Mathematics, Science, and Technology) at the Thomas Metcalf Laboratory School for five summers, the Senior Associate for the Center of the Study of Educational Policy, Illinois State University, and President and Consultant of CEM Associates, Inc. In 2014 he also established the Dr. Charles Morris Annual STEM Fair for Underrepresented Students.⁷

Charles and Jeanne were active, and humble, members of the community, volunteering in numerous organizations and serving on many boards at the local, state, regional, and national levels. Some of those include: the Baby Fold, Heartland Head Start, the Children’s Foundation,

³ Denham, Ryan. “Why Black history makers Charles and Jeanne Morris are anxious about this moment,” WGLT, February 16, 2023, <https://www.wglt.org/local-news/2023-02-16/why-black-history-makers-charles-and-jeanne-morris-are-anxious-about-this-moment>, Date Accessed January 27, 2026.

⁴ Morris, Lyne E. “In memory: Dr. Charles E. Morris, Jr.” Illinois State University News, September 4, 2024, <https://news.illinoisstate.edu/2024/09/in-memory-dr-charles-e-morris-jr/>, Date Accessed January 26, 2026.

⁵ Denham, “Why Black history makers Charles and Jeanne Morris are anxious about this moment;” “Dr. Charles E. Morris, Jr.” obituary.

⁶ “Dr. Charles E. Morris, Jr.” obituary.

⁷ Morris, “In memory: Dr. Charles E. Morris, Jr.”

the United Campus Christian Foundation, the YMCA, Bloomington-Normal Kiwanis, Western Avenue Community Center, Habitat for Humanity, the Town of Normal 125th Anniversary committee, the McLean County Historical Society, the League of Women Voters, the Illinois Committee on Black Concerns in Higher Education, Central Illinois Chapter of SCORE, the Illinois State Board of Education Bias Review Committee, the American Council on Education Committee on Campus Trends, and the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture Citizen's Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunity. Additionally, Charles was a board member of the Interdenominational Theological Seminary, Atlanta, Georgia.

Charles earned numerous awards for his service to the community. In 1979, Charles received the Town of Normal Dr. Martin L. King Jr. Adult Human Relations and was inducted into the African American Hall of Fame Museum, one of several partners of the Peoria Riverfront Museum, in 2011. He was inducted into the Emeriti College of Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame in 2022. Charles and Jeanne were honored as History Makers by the McLean County Museum of History in 2017 and the subject of the Bloomington-Normal NAACP Youth Council's documentary in 2023. And the Morrises established an Educational Equity Endowment (EEE) Fund with the ISU Foundation. Truly, the Morrises were the textbook definition of "servant leaders."

Charles Morris, Jr., passed away on August 11, 2024, in Bloomington. Funeral services were held at First Presbyterian Church in Normal and he was buried at Park Hill Cemetery and Mausoleum in Bloomington.⁸

By: Mike Matejka, 2017

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⁸ Find a Grave, database and images (https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/283247609/charles_edward-morris: accessed January 27, 2026), memorial page for Charles Edward "Buddy" Morris Jr. (30 Sep 1931–11 Aug 2024), Find a Grave Memorial ID 283247609, citing Park Hill Cemetery and Mausoleum, Bloomington, McLean County, Illinois, USA; Maintained by Chuck Cherry Jr (contributor 47015871).