

Eva Mae Gaiter Jones (1930-1987) was a Bloomington civic leader with a conviction to serve her family and community. She began her efforts to serve Bloomington in her youth as a Concordia Y-Teens officer and continued her committed service throughout her entire life. She never turned away from challenging situations or tough decisions. Jones made her desire for a safer and more equitable Bloomington her life's mission. She expressed her values and determination through her pursuit of knowledge, activism, public office, and involvement in her church and various community organizations. As a mother of seven children who all attended Bloomington Public Schools, public education became a critical matter that impacted Jones and her family.

Jones served on Bloomington's District 87 Board of Education for three terms (1971 to 1979). In 1977 she was unanimously elected to serve as the school board president. She was the first Black individual elected to the school board, and the first person of color to serve as school board president in the district's history. Jones listened to the voices of students, teachers, and parents. She advocated for fair treatment during a time of increased racial tensions, teacher strikes, and budget deficits. With her passion for serving and the momentum she gained in service to the school board, she won a seat on the Bloomington City Council, serving from 1979 to 1981. She broke another color barrier by becoming the first Black person elected to the city council. Jones initiated opportunities for underserved communities and coordinated youth, women, and minority organizations. Throughout all of the work in her life, Jones aimed to find "common ground where we can meet" to make Bloomington a better place for all people to live.¹

Jones did not grow up in Bloomington. She grew up in Frenchmans Bayou, Arkansas. Born Eva Mae Gaiter, in Wilson, Arkansas on March 15, 1930, she was the eldest child of James and Tommie Lee (Dearing) Gaiter.² James Gaiter was born in Birmingham, Alabama on December 26, 1904. He was the son of Gene and Eliza (Coleman) Gaiter.³ Tommie was born on October 19, 1910, in Pickens, Mississippi. She was the daughter of Rev. Thomas and Anna (Crafton) Dearing. James and Tommie wed on December 26, 1928, in Frenchmans Bayou, Arkansas.⁴ James and Tommie had three children; Eva, Lendsy, and Curtis.⁵

Between the family's time in Frenchmans Bayou, Arkansas and Bloomington, Illinois, they lived in Troy, Arkansas starting in 1940, where James worked on a farm.⁶ According to an interview with a friend of Eva's, as a child, Eva spent scorching Arkansas summers in fields picking cotton where she determined her dislike of the experience. This motivated Eva to obtain an education and career.⁷ When Eva was not in the field picking cotton, she and her brothers attended a small one-teacher, one-room school.⁸ Their father James had no formal education, and their mother Tommie's highest level of education was her completion of 8th grade, serving as another possible motivation for Eva's education ambitions⁹

¹ Denise Fries-Romack phone interview with Ronnie Jones, January 17, 2024.

² Academic Record for Eva Gaiter, ISU Registrar's Office, email correspondence between Madison Heiser and Cameo Good, July 2, 2024.

³ "James Gaiter," *The Pantagraph*, February 23, 1976.

⁴ "Tommie Gaiter," *The Pantagraph*, July 15, 2016.

⁵ "Eva M Gaiter," *1940 United States Census*.

⁶ "James Gaiter," *1940 United States Census*.

⁷ Unnamed friend of Eva Jones in a short biography from 2004.

⁸ "Roast Eva Jones, Bloomington City Council Person" at Crestwicke Country Club, October 21, 1979.

⁹ "James Gaiter" and "Tommie Gaiter," *1940 United States Census*.

Eva's parents relocated the family to Bloomington, Illinois in 1944.¹⁰ According to family history, they chose Bloomington because James had a brother who had found more job opportunities when he moved to Bloomington some years earlier. The Gaiters settled into their first Bloomington home at 512 West Jackson Street. They were also residents of 506 West Taylor Street, 302 North Morris Avenue, and 908 West Locust Street before her parents settled into their final Bloomington home on 811 East Walnut Street by 1964.¹¹ James and Tommie finished raising their children in Bloomington where they found long-lasting careers, residing there for the rest of their lives. James worked at two car dealerships for many years in Bloomington. First, as a processor and clean up man at Butts Ford (1955-1962) and then as a maintenance worker at Johnny Martin Chevrolet from 1963 until he retired in 1972.¹² Tommie worked at Illinois State University as a supervisor of Food Services. She retired from ISU in 1965, receiving a certificate for her dedicated service. Tommie also spent time working in food services at Illinois Wesleyan University.¹³

The family quickly established themselves in the Bloomington community after their relocation. The same year they moved to the city, a local group called the Jolly Brunch Club sponsored a social at their new home on 512 West Jackson Street. In August 1944, *The Pantagraph* published an advertisement that Mrs. Tommie Lee Gaiter would be hosting a lawn social and barbecue.¹⁴ James was an active member of the Union Baptist Church until he passed away on February 22, 1976.¹⁵ Tommie devoted 56 years of her life as a member of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church. She faithfully served her church as treasurer of the Benevolent Offering, president of the choir, president of missions, and president of the Mother Board. Tommie was remembered as "Mother" Gaiter and a pillar of her church community.¹⁶ The congregation looked to her for advice and guidance until her death at 105 years old on June 6, 2016.¹⁷ Both Tommie and James are buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

The Gaiter children transitioned into the Bloomington public school system in 1944, which was quite different from their previous school in Arkansas.¹⁸ Eva attended eighth grade at the Horatio G. Bent School and the following year, entered Bloomington High School.¹⁹ At BHS, she learned to play the trombone and played in the school band. Additionally, she participated in Concordia Y-Teens, a YWCA program that cultivated leadership abilities in Black female students. Eva was a member of the organization throughout her four years of high school, serving as an officer her senior year. Concordia Y-Teens presented her with opportunities to plan events, build professional contacts, and attend leadership training sessions.²⁰

Jones was also active in the Union Baptist church, where she was a member of the state Sunday school and Baptist Training Union Congress.²¹ Outside of her church activities, she volunteered with various YWCA programs such as the YWCA annual holiday observance in

¹⁰ "To Sponsor Social," *The Pantagraph*, August 4, 1944.

¹¹ *Bloomington City Directories* 1946, 1949, 1953, 1962, and 1966.

¹² *Bloomington City Directories*, 1955 through 1972.

¹³ "Tommie Gaiter."

¹⁴ "To Sponsor Social," *The Pantagraph*, August 4, 1944.

¹⁵ "James Gaiter."

¹⁶ "Tommie Gaiter."

¹⁷ "Mother' Gaiter," *The Pantagraph*, March 10, 2004.

¹⁸ "Roast Eva Jones, Bloomington City Council Person."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ "Y-Teen Club Leaders Learn Duties," *Pantagraph*, October 21, 1947.

²¹ "Union Baptists Slate Musicales," *The Pantagraph*, July 28, 1948.

1945.²² As a teenager and young adult, she developed connections and investments in the Bloomington community. Her high school yearbook quote, “Tho’ she is little she is mighty,” reflected the determined spirit that she continued to lead her life with after high school.²³ Despite earning the nickname “Pee Wee,” Jones was unwavering in her commitment to creating change and leadership amid obstacles. She graduated from Bloomington High School in 1948. Following graduation, Jones left Bloomington to attend business school in Chicago, Illinois.²⁴

Jones was a graduate of Cortez W. Peters Business College in Chicago, located at 309 East Garfield Boulevard.²⁵ The school’s Chicago location was founded in 1941 by Cortez Peters, Sr., a world typing champion.²⁶ “His schools were among the only privately owned African American schools in the nation, to teach the professional skill of typing to a black audience.”²⁷ Students like Jones were trained in “commercial subjects including typewriting, shorthand, and filing, as well as preparation for Government Civil Service Examinations.”²⁸ Many graduates who earned two-year business certificates from Cortez obtained positions in the federal government or went on to college. The school was successful for many years but closed in the mid-1970s. While studying at the business school, Jones worked as a secretary at an unknown newspaper company.²⁹

After graduating, Jones was unable to find employment, so she moved back to Bloomington in 1951.³⁰ She lived with her parents and brothers at 302 North Morris Avenue.³¹ From 1951-1952, Jones was enrolled as a full-time student in business education courses at Illinois State Normal University (today Illinois State University).³² She met her future husband, fellow student James “Jimmie” Allen Baker Jones, during her time at ISNU.

Jimmie, like Eva, was not originally raised in Bloomington. He was born on April 25, 1931, in Huntsville, Missouri, and raised in Springfield, Illinois. Jimmie was the middle child of George and Josephine (Holly) Jones.³³ From 1950-1952, Jimmie was enrolled in the health and physical education curriculum at ISNU, and also played center on the ISNU men’s basketball team.³⁴ Eva and Jimmie married on June 28, 1952.³⁵ Jimmie left school to serve in the United States Army during the Korean War.³⁶ Upon his return, Jimmie resumed courses and his position

²² “Hanging of Green Service to be Held,” *The Pantagraph*, December 9, 1945.

²³ Bloomington High School yearbook, *Aepix*, 1948.

²⁴ “Going to Chicago,” *The Pantagraph*, September 10, 1948.

²⁵ “Typists, Stenographers, and Machine Operators are in Great Demand!” *The Chicago Tribune*, February 3, 1952.

²⁶ “Changing Times Having an Effect On Struggling Black Business School,” *The Galesburg Register-Mail*, June 17, 1974.

²⁷ Narrated by JoAnne Peters King, “A Biography of the Lives of Cortez W. Peters, Sr., World’s Accuracy Typist and Cortez W. Peters, Jr., Author and Recorder of Championship Keyboarding Methodology,” https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2019.30.1, date accessed July 22, 2024.

²⁸ “Changing Times Having an Effect on Struggling Black Business School.”

²⁹ “Eva M Gaiter,” *1950 United States Census*.

³⁰ “Roast Eva Jones, Bloomington City Council Person” at Crestwicke Country Club, October 21, 1979.

³¹ *Bloomington City Directory* 1951.

³² Academic Record for Eva Gaiter, ISU Registrar’s Office, email correspondence between Madison Heiser and Cameo Good, July 2, 2024.

³³ “James A.B. Jones,” *The Pantagraph*, May 24, 2018.

³⁴ Academic Record for James “Jimmie” Jones, ISU Registrar’s Office, email correspondence between Madison Heiser and Cameo Good, July 3, 2024.

³⁵ “Miss Gaiter Becomes Bride of Jim Jones,” *The Pantagraph*, July 7, 1952.

³⁶ “James A.B. Jones,” in the U.S. Veterans’ Gravesites, ca. 1775-2019, Ancestry.com, date accessed February 9, 2024.

on the basketball team from 1954-1955, but did not earn a degree.³⁷ In 1972 he was part of the inaugural class inducted into the Illinois State Athletics Percy Family Hall of Fame.³⁸

Eva and Jimmie established their initial home together in Springfield, Illinois where they briefly resided at 1505 South 17th Street.³⁹ Then, they relocated to Bloomington to live at 189 Sunnyside Court for a period.⁴⁰ The Jones lived at several Bloomington addresses including 410 East Market Street, 906 Linden Street, 1718 Wildwood Road, and 323 Vista Drive.⁴¹ The couple had seven children; Judy, Deborah, Sharon, James Rodney, Ronnie James, Christopher “Cris,” and Tawanda “TJ.”⁴²

Eva Jones once again became actively engaged with the Union Baptist Church when she returned to Bloomington. She generously shared her time and musical talents with numerous church programs, primarily working with youth. In 1953, Jones was the General Chair of Arrangements of the Young People’s Department, overseeing the fourth annual Young People’s Day. Young People’s Day was celebrated with three youth-led Sunday services that included addresses given by youth Baptist church leaders from Chicago and Champaign, and discussion panels.⁴³

While Jones served as head of the Youth Department at Union Baptist Church, she helped organize a program that honored African American culture as part of “Negro History Week” in February 1963. This public event was held at the church in collaboration with Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church. The program featured music performed by a senior from Illinois Wesleyan University, actors portraying Black historical figures, guest speakers, and choirs.⁴⁴

Jones was also active in the Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, becoming a member of the church later in life. As with Union Baptist, she became heavily involved with church activities, serving as the church clerk, the youth choir director, and a senior choir member.⁴⁵

Jones was actively involved in many community initiatives and contributed to various causes through facilitation roles and volunteering her musical abilities. From a young age, she volunteered her vocal abilities to her church and YWCA programs. Into adulthood, she continued serving her community by utilizing her piano skills to support causes such as the National Association of Colored Women. The NACWC was established by Black women in 1896, to offer a space for women of color to uplift other women of color, their children and families, and their communities through service and education.⁴⁶ The organization became divided into regions with state divisions, with Illinois in the Central region. In 1954, she participated in a Bloomington recital and tea sponsored by the Central District of the Illinois Association of Colored Women, demonstrating her piano abilities.⁴⁷

³⁷ “Goff Issues Call to Prospective Basketeers- Five Letter Winners Return to 1954 Squad,” *The Vidette*, November 3, 1954; Academic Record for James “Jimmie” Jones, ISU Registrar’s Office, email correspondence with Cameo Good, July 3, 2024.

³⁸ Illinois State Athletics Percy Family Hall of Fame, <https://goredbirds.com/honors/illinois-state-athletics-percy-family-hall-of-fame/jimmie-jones/123>, date accessed July 22, 2024.

³⁹ “Miss Eva Gaiter Becomes Bride of Jim Jones,” *The Pantagraph*, July 7, 1952.

⁴⁰ *Bloomington City Directories* 1955-56 and 1957.

⁴¹ *Bloomington City Directories* 1959, 1960, 1970, and 1980.

⁴² “Twin City civic leader dies following illness,” *The Pantagraph*, July 22, 1987.

⁴³ “Union Baptist Youth Plan Church Event,” *The Pantagraph*, June 16, 1953.

⁴⁴ “Negro History Week Program Scheduled,” *The Pantagraph*, March 4, 1963.

⁴⁵ “Mount Pisgah Church sets harvest tea,” *The Pantagraph*, November 17, 1978.

⁴⁶ “About NACWC,” National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, Inc., <https://www.nacwc.com/history>, date accessed July 22, 2024.

⁴⁷ “Union Baptist Youth Plan Church Event.”

Jones was highly respected among those who had the pleasure of knowing and working with her. Many praised her professionalism, work ethic, and heart for her community. While raising her children and volunteering, she was employed in the late 1950s and early 1960s at Illinois Wesleyan University as a counterworker before transitioning into a career as a telephone operator at General Telephone Company.⁴⁸ A colleague from her time as a telephone operator fondly remembered Jones as a “vibrant, friendly person and it was easy to like her. Later, I came to admire her drive and perseverance as she became more involved in community affairs.”⁴⁹ Later, Jones became a longtime employee of Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. She began her career at Firestone in 1969 as a receptionist, then by 1973 she was a typing clerk. In 1979, Jones was promoted to Traffic Manager at the company.⁵⁰ One of the duties in her new position included inspecting the 11-foot earthmover tires before they were shipped.⁵¹ She continued working there until 1987.⁵²

Jones became involved in activities and groups in her community seeking to foster connections with others and improve the conditions and opportunities for people of underrepresented identities, in particular youth. She was mindful of the national and local tensions surrounding race and equality, seeking to engage in constructive conversations to highlight these issues. Striving to achieve more inclusive environments for everyone, Jones utilized her voice to amplify the needs of those around her.

One way she accomplished this was by writing a letter to the editor of *The Pantagraph* titled, “Urges U.S. Face Racial Problems,” which was published on January 16, 1958. The piece expressed that the American people and their communities must recognize the domestic issues citizens face and not be distracted by events such as the successful launch of Sputnik 1 (the first artificial Earth satellite that was launched into low orbit by the former Soviet Union). Jones called out the October 1957 incident in Little Rock, Arkansas where Governor Orval Faubus failed in his attempt to keep Little Rock’s schools segregated by ordering the state’s National Guard to block Central High School’s entrance to prevent nine Black students from attending. She stated, “just how many Governor Faubuses have we in or out of office?” She also questioned the denial of opportunities to African Americans, stating that while the United States now has integrated schools, “what about the Negro boys and girls who are prepared to teacher in integrated schools and are denied the privilege”⁵³ Jones wrote in a tone of hopeful criticism that the future might be a space where education and political influence could be obtained by all equally.

Jones knew that actions would speak louder than words. So, in late 1969 she decided to run for a seat on the Bloomington Board of Education so that she could help build better schools (especially for five of her children who were all attending District 87 schools at the time) and a better community for all.⁵⁴

Racial tensions had been growing at Bloomington High School and culminated in early February 1970 when basketball star Reggie Curry was pulled aside by his basketball coach, Ralph Sacket, and told to “quit the Afro-American Club and cut your hair, or I’ll cut you from the team.” The club was “an all-African American student group that met to develop a better

⁴⁸ *Bloomington City Directories* 1959, 1960, 1965, 1966, 1967.

⁴⁹ Unnamed friend of Eva Jones in a short undated biography.

⁵⁰ “Business, On-line,” *The Pantagraph*, March 12, 1979.

⁵¹ “Hefty,” *The Pantagraph*, October 22, 1979.

⁵² *Bloomington City Directory*, 1987.

⁵³ “Urges U.S. Face Racial Problems,” *The Pantagraph*, January 16, 1958.

⁵⁴ “Mrs. Jones Urges ‘Access;’ Counselor Praised by Many,” *The Pantagraph*, April 3, 1970.

understanding and appreciation of Afro-American Heritage.” Additionally, when Curry told his friends about his experience, many of them shared their own experiences of discrimination at the school. Curry reported the incident to his high school counselor, James Lyle (who, incidentally, was the only Black teacher at the school), who then reported it to the principal. And while there were no consequences to Coach Sackett, Lyle was let go at the end of the school year.⁵⁵

In response to the growing number of discriminatory instances and frustrated by the lack of respect and understanding for their culture, a group of students, many of whom were members of the Afro-American club, boycotted classes on February 26, 1970. They developed a list of grievances and requests to present to the school administration. When these grievances became public, a group of white students publicly mocked their requests and started a fight. While the incident ended quickly, racial tensions at the school were coming to a boiling point.⁵⁶

In the spring of 1970, Jones was among ten candidates running for two vacant seats on the Bloomington Board of Education. Her campaign focused on “bridging the communications gap,” which she addressed as a primary cause of district-wide racial tensions.⁵⁷ She especially urged more transparency from the school board and allowing the public to participate more fully. In Jones’ opinion, “a board that completely isolates itself from the public will not be aware of needs and the feelings of the community.”⁵⁸ At a special school board meeting that was called to consider the dismissal of Lyle and Sackett, candidate Jones turned that meeting into a public forum over the issue. She insisted that it was not a public meeting “if the public could not gain access to it.”⁵⁹

Jones was embraced with community support; she was called upon to enact change as a voice for people.⁶⁰ One community member, Gloria M. Gaston, wrote in *The Pantagraph* that Eva Jones would be able to convey the “black experience” with the insight and understanding needed to bring about viable solutions. Gaston felt that Jones was a “qualified and dedicated candidate, equal to the challenge; being black is but an additional bonus.”⁶¹ Unfortunately, Jones did not win a seat on the board, receiving the fourth most votes in the election.⁶²

After the new board was elected, the district encountered more challenges in May 1970. Disruption broke out at a school assembly (for juniors and seniors) hosted by the Afro-American Culture Club. Around 50 white students decided they did not like the program and attempted to leave against assembly rules. The program was hosted to celebrate and create a greater understanding of Black culture and heritage, including original poems, an African dance number, and a presentation of the play *A Raisin in the Sun*.⁶³ However, the disruptions resulted in a fight, and the Bloomington police were called to intervene, which resulted in all white and Black students involved being suspended. Fighting erupted again the next day and police were brought back, this time in full riot gear. This prompted a police presence at the high school for the remainder of the school year as tensions between students, and faculty, remained high.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ “A Community in Conflict,” online exhibit McLean County Museum of History, <https://mchistory.org/digital-exhibits/a-community-in-conflict/timeline/1970>, date accessed July 22, 2024.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “275 Hear School Views,” *The Pantagraph*, April 1, 1970.

⁵⁸ “Candidates See Need for Executive Sessions,” *The Pantagraph*, April 3, 1970.

⁵⁹ “Mrs. Jones Urges ‘Access;’ Counselor Praised by Many.”

⁶⁰ Interview with Ronnie Jones.

⁶¹ “275 Hear School Views.”

⁶² “Holmes, Barnard Winners in Record School Turnout,” *The Pantagraph*, April 7, 1970.

⁶³ “A Community in Conflict,” online exhibit McLean County Museum of History.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

During these times of uncertainty in District 87, Eva was an outspoken member of groups that addressed concerns in Bloomington education. She was a member and spokesperson of Bloomington High School's Parent Group on Human Relations. They formed in response to the racial violence that had broken out at Bloomington High School in the spring of 1970. The group advocated for quality education, including "quality black" educators, workshops for teachers and administrators on understanding their students, and more material on Black culture.⁶⁵ They also would work together to submit recommendations and ideas to the district administration and the Bloomington Board of Education to help improve schools for all students who attended.⁶⁶

In addition to the continued concern over tensions at the high school, the new school year began when strained relations between the district and the Bloomington Education Association (the teachers' union) came to a breaking point. A total of 325 Bloomington school teachers led the only teachers' strike in the district's history from August 31 to September 7, 1970.⁶⁷ The BEA organized the illegal strike for improved contracts with the school district.⁶⁸ To compel teachers to return to work, the Board of Education requested a temporary injunction from the Circuit Court, which was granted and schools reopened on September 8.⁶⁹ Unresolved contract terms had union members considering another strike and teacher resignations, while the board reported budget deficits. When the BEA rejected the board's final proposal, the board proceeded to adopt a new teacher salary schedule for the 1970-1971 school year, thus ending 6-months of talks with the union.⁷⁰ Because the board adopted a salary schedule without reaching a contract agreement with the teachers' union, the BEA expressed its dissatisfaction by voting to remove all board members from office and presenting that resolution to the superintendent of District 87.⁷¹

The community increasingly looked toward the Board of Education for solutions. Students were afraid to go to school. A group of 627 students signed a petition asking the school board to do something to protect students while at school. In response, police presence became a regular fixture at the school, and more students, mostly Black students, were expelled.⁷² However, this was not what some parents envisioned happening, in particular Eva Jones. She was determined to secure a seat on the school board, especially in light of the continued conflict and tensions in the schools in which her children attended. On October 7, 1970, Jones announced her intention to again run for the Bloomington Board of Education in the April election, enthusiastic to help initiate a change.⁷³

During her second bid for a seat on the school board, she was in a field of nine candidates who were vying for three open seats (three-year positions each). Since the unsuccessful campaign, she "had been an active citizen in school board affairs," which included serving on the BHS Parent Group on Human Relations.⁷⁴ To many, Jones was "the only candidate uniquely able to understand the aspirations of all voters for continued progress in the Bloomington

⁶⁵ "A Voice For Students," *The Pantagraph*, October 7, 1970.

⁶⁶ "High School PTA Slates Panel," *The Pantagraph*, October 4, 1970.

⁶⁷ "Teachers Eye Offer," *The Pantagraph*, September 28, 1970.

⁶⁸ "Teachers Strike—Injunction Sought," *The Pantagraph*, August 31, 1970.

⁶⁹ "Bloomington Teachers Heed Injunction—Classes Resume," *The Pantagraph*, September 8, 1970.

⁷⁰ "Harter: 'Willing to Negotiate,'" *The Pantagraph*, September 29, 1970; "Board Sets Salaries, Ends 6-Month Talks," *The Pantagraph*, October 1, 1970.

⁷¹ "BEA Files Request to Oust Members of the School Board," *The Pantagraph*, October 16, 1970; "Board, Teacher Debate Nixed," *The Pantagraph*, October 25, 1970.

⁷² Dan Leifel, Sandra Holt, and Linda Aschenbrenner. *Our Proud History: Bloomington Public Schools, District 87 Sesquicentennial, 1857-2007*. (Bloomington, StarNet Digital Publishing, 2007), 122.

⁷³ "Mrs. Jones to Run," *The Pantagraph*, October 7, 1970.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Schools, as well as to represent the views of minority groups.”⁷⁵ This time, Jones was the top vote-getter, winning a seat on the school board.

During her first term, the Bloomington Board of Education and the Bloomington Education Association ratified a two-year contract with teachers in the district, which had endured months of negotiations using a federal mediator.⁷⁶ Other issues addressed were student expulsions, hiring teachers, disclosure of board members’ personal income information, and transportation.

Committed to advocacy for underrepresented voices, Jones was willing to dissent from the majority and present alternative solutions to district issues during her tenure on the school board. When new legislation proposals were brought before the Illinois General Assembly, Jones was the only board member who spoke in favor of transparency which required board members and candidates to report sources and amounts of their income.⁷⁷ Student expulsion cases also came before the board. Jones prioritized optimal student learning environments, inquiring about the methods and quality of education available to students if they were expelled. In one case, a high school freshman was accused of a physical altercation with a teacher, where Jones was the sole vote against expelling the youth.⁷⁸ Jones utilized her position to listen and engage with parents and city officials to best advocate for students.

When the issue over the safety of students walking to and from Centennial School in the Fairway Knolls neighborhood arose, Jones was appointed as chairperson of a board committee to study the issue to decide if transportation was necessary. Residents of Fairway Knolls presented a petition to the board to get bus transportation for their children attending Centennial School because there were no sidewalks between the school and the subdivision. While Jones did point out that if buses were furnished to children living in Fairway Knolls, “the board could expect demands for busing from other areas of the city where pedestrian safety is of equal concern.” Despite that concern, the board approved bus transportation against one board member’s motion to deny the service.⁷⁹

While much of her time was devoted to her responsibilities as a member of the school board, Jones remained active in other community groups and causes. In 1972, Jones served as coordinator for the Minority Voter’s Coalition. This group aimed to assist underrepresented communities in registering to vote for upcoming local, state, and national elections. She acknowledged the power of voting and representation, stating it is “only through organization that minorities can wield the necessary political clout to effect desired change.”⁸⁰ Through the coalition, she sought to inform and encourage underrepresented groups to seize the opportunity to express their desires and concerns through voting. Her children recalled that she instilled a strong value of participating in elections in them growing up.⁸¹

Jones firmly championed her beliefs. In 1975, she was an active member of the Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church and became involved in an internal conflict. Jones was among the majority of the congregation who supported the church board of deacons’ desire to terminate their current pastor, Reverend Roosevelt J. Davis, with a vote of “no confidence” in him.⁸² On September 7, 1975, Jones was arrested after allegedly attempting to incite a crowd that had gathered at the

⁷⁵ “Represents minority groups,” *The Pantagraph*, March 31, 1971.

⁷⁶ “City school board, teachers sign pact,” *The Pantagraph*, August 10, 1972.

⁷⁷ “Firm released from contract,” *The Pantagraph*, November 11, 1971.

⁷⁸ “Board expels BHS student,” *The Pantagraph*, January 28, 1972.

⁷⁹ “School buses to serve ‘Knolls,’” *The Pantagraph*, October 12, 1972.

⁸⁰ “Minority Voters Should Register,” *The Vidette*, February 17, 1972.

⁸¹ Denise Fries-Romack phone interview with Ronnie Jones.

⁸² “73-37 vote against pastor,” *The Pantagraph*, September 30, 1970.

church.⁸³ She voiced concerns to fellow church members and an off-duty, plain-clothed officer in the crowd outside of the church. Her criticisms were perceived as encouraging the crowd's "disorder," leading to her arrest. She was released on \$1,000 bond for a court appearance on September 19.⁸⁴

In the spring of 1974, Jones was re-elected to the Bloomington Board of Education for a second three-year term. During this term, she served on the board's education budget committee and the program accounting and insurance committee.⁸⁵ Issues that District 87 faced during her second term included a severe budget deficit, bankruptcy, teacher cuts, continued tensions with the teachers' union, school closures, and relocation of students. Without major changes (and the approval of a referendum by voters to increase the tax rate), the district was projected to become bankrupt by the 1977-1978 school year.⁸⁶ Many decisions made by the board were driven to keep the district afloat.

However, the cuts the district and board made were received poorly by the public and some teachers. With the closure of Emerson and Jefferson schools, the board decided on a redistricting plan for students. Many parents criticized the redistricting plans involving the proposed bus system to accommodate the new neighborhood school district boundaries. With the new plan, parents whose children had attended Jefferson School signed a petition for bus access for all students at Bent Elementary, not just those living south of Washington Street. Neighborhood parents were concerned with student safety in the neighborhood and heavy traffic they would have to walk through.⁸⁷ There were also criticisms that resources were going to be used to bus students well outside their neighborhood schools to Centennial School. Superintendent George Stimeling and board President Donn Pierce sought to reason with the community that the district lacked state aid for bussing students living in such proximity to the school, and that students were going to be bussed to Centennial due to it being below enrollment capacity. A father from the Washington East area urged the board to work with a neighborhood school policy so that "the burden of redistricting be shared equally." Despite criticism and concerns from parents and the community, the board approved the redistricting plan on April 7, 1976, with Eva Jones voting against redistricting.⁸⁸

Jones endured criticisms such as being labeled a "sellout" by other members of the Black community.⁸⁹ However, despite increasing controversy within the District, Jones persisted in her ideals. In April 1976, four of the 11 total Black teachers in District 87 were laid off among the 74 total teachers cut that year to save district expenses. William O'Neal, the dean of students at Bloomington Junior High, raised concern about potential employment discrimination. He reasoned the unequal opportunity for seniority, as the District was not actively looking to hire Black teachers 10 years ago. O'Neal, Eva Jones, and the four affected teachers met with Superintendent Stimeling to discuss the BEA contract. O'Neal was particularly concerned because three of the four Black teachers being laid off were at BHS, which would leave no Black teachers at the high school if the cuts remained. "The black youngsters at the high school won't have anyone to identify with," O'Neal stated. However, the administration's hands were tied because of provisions in the BEA's contract, which requires staff reductions be made on the

⁸³ "Woman, youth arrested in altercation at church," *The Pantagraph*, September 8, 1975.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ "City School Board to Study Finances," *The Pantagraph*, May 15, 1975.

⁸⁶ "Board, Officials Optimistic About 'Yes' Votes," *The Pantagraph*, December 7, 1975.

⁸⁷ "School Board Approves Redistricting Plan," *The Pantagraph*, April 8, 1976.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Denise Fries-Romack phone interview with Ronnie Jones.

basis of seniority. The teachers would have to file formal complaints with the commission before any investigation. Stimeling stated that Bloomington did not have an affirmative action plan and had never felt the district had discriminated or that they needed to have one. He also reported that one of the Black teachers was on the top of the “call-back” list, likely to be rehired.⁹⁰ To Stimeling, it was not a big deal that three Black teachers amongst 74 total were being laid off. To members of the Black community, it was a big deal when Black teachers were not equally represented in the District and were being targeted for cuts based solely on seniority and not what was best for students.

Jones was successfully re-elected to a third three-year term on the school board in 1977, crediting the integrity she had demonstrated in previous years as her reason for re-election. At the start of her third term, she was unanimously elected school board President. She served as President from 1977-1978, becoming the first Black school board president for the district.⁹¹

During her third term, Jones continued to address concerns of all voices, listening to parents, teachers, and students in her commitment to the district. This proved difficult though in a time where District 87 continued seeking solutions to offset their deficit which had reached \$2.4 million. In contract negotiations, the Bloomington Education Association had proposed that teachers have a 6 percent pay increase for the school year instead of the 5.18 percent discussed previously. The board of education rejected the BEA’s requests for reopened negotiations for a master contract of 1978-79. When the board rejected reopening negotiations, Jones spoke out and questioned the board for their choice. In Jones’ opinion, the board acted irrationally, both in refusing to reopen negotiations and in approving the policy package. “We’re not engaged in a commercial product—we are responsible to achieve the most healthy climate and condition obtainable to educate our children” she stated. Her support of teachers earned applause from the nearly 75 teachers who had attended the meeting.⁹²

By the fall of 1978 Jones declared her intent to run for a position on Bloomington City Council the following year. She sought a four-year term on the council, expressing that her ambition was to serve the public.⁹³ Jones believed her experiences on the school board would be valuable in making council decisions that affected both the city and schools.⁹⁴ On December 6, 1978, she filed a petition for a seat on the city council.⁹⁵ She declared that if she was one of the four candidates chosen in the primary, she would resign her position on the Bloomington Board of Education to continue her bid for a seat on the city council.⁹⁶

1978 was a busy year for Jones. In addition to her duties on the Board of Education and beginning her run for City Council, she was involved in numerous other community activities. Jones was appointed to the Bloomington Center Citizen’s Committee. The 29-member committee (who were appointed by the City Council) was charged with studying the feasibility and making a recommendation on whether to go ahead with plans to build the Bloomington Centre by seeking \$6 million from the State of Illinois and \$2 million from a private developer.⁹⁷ The Centre would be located downtown (north of the city parking garage, between Madison and

⁹⁰ “It’s Integration vs. Seniority in Schol Cuts,” *The Pantagraph*, April 15, 1976.

⁹¹ “School board elects first black president,” *The Pantagraph*, April 7, 1977.

⁹² “District 87-BEA Rift Deeper After Meeting,” *The Pantagraph*, August 17, 1978.

⁹³ “School Board Member, Incumbent Candidates,” *The Pantagraph*, November 30, 1978.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ “Eva Jones files petition for seat on City Council,” *The Pantagraph*, December 7, 1978.

⁹⁶ “Council primary to weed out four contenders,” *The Pantagraph*, February 7, 1979.

⁹⁷ “Center’s Executive Committee Unearths Questions, Not Answers,” *The Pantagraph*, October 31, 1978; “Citizens panel Oks new head,” *The Pantagraph*, October 26, 1978.

Center Streets) and be a combination convention center and motel for the City of Bloomington.⁹⁸ After months of discussion and study, the committee voted 15-10 to recommend the City Council continue planning and development of the Centre on November 8, 1978.⁹⁹ Jones was one of the “yes” votes to proceed with the plans.¹⁰⁰ However, in a surprise turn about, the City Council voted 3-2 to not appoint a 5-person civic center authority that would have continued the plans and development for the Bloomington Centre. That vote affectively killed consideration of a city-backed motel-convention hall for the city, citing that the Citizen’s Committee findings illustrated that the majority of people in Bloomington did not feel the city needed a civic center.¹⁰¹

Jones was also one of 27 volunteers appointed to the United Way of McLean County Planning and Allocations Committee.¹⁰² She remained an active leader in the Mt. Pisgah Church, directing as chairperson for the annual “Harvest Four-Season Tea,” and guest speaking at programs such as a Women’s Day Program hosted by Wayman AME Church.¹⁰³ And that same year, she established a baseball league.

Jones created the “Target Baseball League” for children living on Bloomington’s west side in the Sunnyside neighborhood.¹⁰⁴ She had considered the need for a youth league in the area for quite some time before it became a reality. Having lived at 189 Sunnyside Court for nearly five years (where she and Jimmie started raising their family), Sunnyside held a special place in her heart.¹⁰⁵ Jones had always felt sports had drawn her family closer. Her husband and her three sons had backgrounds in sports, with her husband, Jimmie, umpiring in collegiate and high school baseball at the time.¹⁰⁶

Eva Jones named the league “Target” because “its goal is to reach kids who have no organization or involvement and are not ‘turned on’ (for whatever reason) to existing league sports.” She interviewed potential interests from the Sunnyside Center and her church, organized volunteers, and sought donations for equipment, uniforms, and other expenses. The schedules were constructed to accommodate the families’ schedules. Games were played every Saturday at Ewing Park West.¹⁰⁷ Jones assessed a community need and brought the community opportunity, fun, and unity. In the first year, the league had four teams with 45 members, representing boys and girls, and different ethnicities.¹⁰⁸ It received positive community support and local business participation, but, dependent as it was on donations and volunteer time, it appears it lasted only one year.

Jones ran for a four-year term on the Bloomington City Council in 1979, winning runner-up to incumbent Jesse Smart in the primary. As promised, Jones resigned from her position on the Bloomington Board of Education because she won the primary, stepping down on April 1, 1979.¹⁰⁹ Both Jones and Smart were highly endorsed as qualified candidates for the two open at-

⁹⁸ “Coming Sunday,” *The Pantagraph*, October 21, 1978; “‘Drama’ sought to boost downtown’s image,” *The Pantagraph*, October 22, 1978.

⁹⁹ “Bloomington civic center gets go-ahead,” *The Pantagraph*, November 9, 1978.

¹⁰⁰ “Here’s how members voted on the civic center,” *The Pantagraph*, November 9, 1978.

¹⁰¹ “Surprise vote kills city-backed center,” *The Pantagraph*, November 14, 1978.

¹⁰² “United Way,” *The Pantagraph*, October 6, 1978.

¹⁰³ “The Club Clipboard,” *The Pantagraph*, April 23, 1978.

¹⁰⁴ “Surrounded by Sports, Woman Starting Leagues,” *The Pantagraph*, June 4, 1978.

¹⁰⁵ Bloomington City Directory.

¹⁰⁶ “Surrounded by Sports, Woman Starting Leagues,” *The Pantagraph*, June 4, 1978.

¹⁰⁷ “New baseball league reaches west-siders,” *The Pantagraph*, July 16, 1978.

¹⁰⁸ “Surrounded by Sports, Woman Starting Leagues.”

¹⁰⁹ “Candidates,” *The Pantagraph*, March 3, 1979.

large City Council positions due to their extensive experience serving Bloomington.¹¹⁰ Jones received support community leaders such as W.A. Matheson, who wrote that she “has fully demonstrated her ability, both in business and public office.”¹¹¹ Another prominent community leader, Noble Thomas, wrote, “A vote Tuesday for Eva Jones would indeed be a step toward good government in the City of Bloomington.”¹¹² Thomas that her “work, her integrity, and her ability to give all questions her undivided attention,” made Jone qualified for the position. With support of the Bloomington community, Eva Jones became the first Black person elected to the Bloomington City Council. She won with an 11-vote margin over candidate Art Foreman.¹¹³

Because the margin of votes between Foreman and Jones was so close, Foreman called for an unofficial vote recount when the Bloomington Election Commission discovered “irregularities” that might have affected three votes in Precincts 12 and 18. A vote recount had not taken place in a city election within 40 years.¹¹⁴ Despite the close margin, it was found that the discrepancies did not warrant an official recount, so Foreman did not proceed with the process of filing a “petition of discovery,” or gathering written statements from five voters to request a recount from the McLean County Circuit Court.¹¹⁵

However, what should have been a four-year term for Jones, would only be a two-year term because on the same ballot was a proposal for a return to the ward system of government in Bloomington.¹¹⁶ In 1953, the majority of the citizens of Bloomington voted in the city manager-at-large council form of government.¹¹⁷ This meant that citizens had been represented by four councilpersons and a mayor all elected at large. Former Bloomington Mayor, Robert McGraw, launched the ward system drive because it “illustrated the residents’ desire for a more representative form of government.” McGraw felt that residents were “fed up” with representation on council that did not reflect all of the people living in Bloomington more equally.¹¹⁸

Before Jones assumed office, Bloomington residents voted in favor of returning to the aldermanic system of governing, dividing the city into seven wards with an at-large mayor elected. Under the ward system, each ward would have its own alderman, and the mayor would only have veto power and no voting rights. The proposal was narrowly approved by 24 votes, which meant the terms of Jones and Smart were unexpectedly cut in half; they served their terms from 1979-1981.¹¹⁹

During Jones’ time in office, the city council addressed street improvements, development plans, drawing ward boundaries, the Sunnyside Neighborhood Center, taxes, contractor disputes, firearms, liquor licenses, parking, and an issue brought up by the Central Illinois Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. Jones was active in many of these matters, with her contributions breaking several “deadlocks.”¹²⁰ One prominent debate centered on drawing ward boundary lines in time for the 1981 city election. In August 1979, Jones mediated a dispute

¹¹⁰ Trio of Council Candidates Serves Consideration,” *The Pantagraph*, March 28, 1979.

¹¹¹ “Record Supports Eva Jones,” *The Pantagraph*,

¹¹² “Experience Qualifies Eva Jones.” *The Pantagraph*, March 30, 1979.

¹¹³ “Eva Jones, Jesse Smart Win Bloomington City Council Seats,” *The Pantagraph*, April 4, 1979.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ “Foreman Concedes Despite Recount,” *The Pantagraph*, April 12, 1979.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ “Ward Proposition Clears Last Hurdle, Lands on Ballot,” *The Pantagraph*, October 2, 1964.

¹¹⁸ “Ward system voted in,” *The Pantagraph*, April 4, 1979.

¹¹⁹ “Vote Recounts Rare in City,” *The Pantagraph*, April 4, 1979.

¹²⁰ “Council OKs Citizens Panel,” *The Pantagraph*, August 7, 1979.

among council members by proposing citizen involvement. “I can’t see why we don’t involve the citizens. We should always welcome that,” Jones stated. This resulted in the council’s approval of a citizens committee to draw the ward map, requiring the council’s final approval.¹²¹

In viewing proposals, Jones aimed to comprehensively understand developments and the potential impacts of the council’s decisions on Bloomington residents. When the Council considered an urban development proposal to annex and rezone 150-acres of the west-side John M. Scott Estate for a gravel pit and a mobile home court (between U.S. 150 and Cottage Avenue from Forrest Street north to Hovey Avenue), Jones acknowledged the citizens’ apprehension about the noise, safety hazards, and lack of single-family residences on the site. Identifying the “increase in the number of low-income dwellings ‘in one pocket’” of the proposed mobile home court, Jones stated, “I do see a socio-economic problem on the west-side leaning toward low income.”¹²² An investigation of the proposal was conducted and proved satisfactory for many board members, including Jones who voted in favor of the Scott Estate development. Under the annexation agreement, Roew Construction Co. (1503 Cottage Avenue in Bloomington) would operate a gravel pit in the south portion of the tract for 10 years, at which time the area of the gravel pit would be donated to the city as a 47-acre park with a 20-acre lake.¹²³

Jones was challenged with difficult decisions, exemplified when she endorsed the property plans while some residents firmly believed the mobile home park demonstrated a lack of representation.¹²⁴ To determine her endorsement, Jones also accounted for the report of Kenneth Emmons, a principal planner with the McLean County Regional Planning Commission and planning advisor to Bloomington. Emmons stated that “the mobile home park would provide a transition between industrial parcels and single-family houses in the area.” In addition to this information, Jones took into consideration that the development plans were approved with the city’s Building Safety Department agreeing to regulate dust, and the noise would be regulated by the State Environmental Protection Agency.¹²⁵ A concession given to concerned residents was that a road would be constructed southwest off Cottage to U.S. 150 that would serve the property and be used by traffic from the gravel pit. The road would eventually be developed as a collector street to carry north-south traffic. On June 11, 1979, the city council approved the plan for the land use, with the city and residents claiming victory because both sides felt they had a say in a well laid out plan.¹²⁶ Ten years later, Rowe Construction turned the gravel pit land over to the City of Bloomington and efforts began to develop the park and lake, which today is known as White Oak Park and lake.¹²⁷

Jones participated in evaluating development investments through research, travel, and meetings with developers. Following initial opposition to a proposal for a shopping area at Veterans Parkway and Oakland Avenue in January 1980, Jones changed her position after meeting with developers and traveling to Springfield to see a similar project the firm had developed there. The plan for a \$3 million development had been proposed in 1979. It included a Kroger’s grocery store and a Super-X Drug Store, along with several smaller shops. Jones came to realize the benefits of the plan, in particular to that area of Bloomington.¹²⁸

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² “Neighbors Objecting to Scott Estate Plans,” *The Pantagraph*, May 15, 1979.

¹²³ “Scott Estate Plans Complete,” *The Pantagraph*, June 7, 1979.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ “Scott Estate plan OK’d,” *The Pantagraph*, June 12, 1979.

¹²⁷ “Govern,” *The Pantagraph*, March 27, 1989.

¹²⁸ “Shopping Area Bonds Get Ok,” *The Pantagraph*, March 11, 1980.

In December 1979, Jones demonstrated a spirited resistance to a civil liberties request involving the city of Bloomington's public nativity display. The controversial religious display sat on a strip of city land in front of the ACI Building located at 210 South East Street.¹²⁹ The Central Illinois Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reported it was unconstitutional for the city to spend public funds on the purchase and maintenance of a religious symbol and sought its removal.¹³⁰ According to records, the scene was purchased in September 1978 at a cost of \$1,455 (or about \$6,800 in 2023).¹³¹ The scene was first put up during the 1978 Christmas season, and no local objection was raised (though similar cases made news in other cities across the United States). The local ACLU did not object that year because they did not know the display was on city owned land. Eva Jones advocated for keeping the display, stating that "it in no way violates anybody's human interest or spiritual recognition," She gave examples of "In God We Trust" on coins and swearing in ceremonies for presidents that show "this is a God-fearing nation." Jones went further saying that the city should fight the matter through. Citing her experience on the District 87 Board of Education, she referenced the removal of prayer from schools to emphasize her argument that "religious and moral symbols are being stripped from society."¹³² Other council members, including the mayor, also felt this was a "frivolous" suit and felt the ACLU could find more beneficial things to deal with.¹³³

After much debate, the city council ultimately voted 3 to 2 to sell the nativity scene. It was their hope that in selling it, it would be displayed the next year without the "onus of city ownership." One of the deciding factors to the sale was most likely the advice of Corporation Counsel, David Stanczak, who told the council in a report that "court rulings indicate that city ownership of the display probably does violate the constitution." According to Mayor Richard Buchanan, several groups had come forward who were interested in purchasing the scene so that it could be displayed the next holiday season. Jesse Smart and Eva Jones were the two dissenting votes opposed to the sale of the Nativity scene.¹³⁴

Councilwoman Jones was highly regarded by her community, with events held in her honor and invitations for her to speak at public events. Jones inspired others through her contributions to the community and representation of women and African Americans in leadership positions. This was evidenced when she was invited to deliver an address to the Gamma Beta Chapter of the international women's service organization, Epsilon Sigma Alpha.¹³⁵ In November 1979, she spoke to the philanthropy sorority on the topic of "Women in Politics."¹³⁶

Jones was passionate about the welfare of the people of Bloomington, especially those living on the city's west side. In the fall of 1979, the struggling Sunnyside Neighborhood Center, located at 1612 W. Olive Street, was on the verge of closing. This center provided much needed resources to west side residents including transportation services, daycare, immunization clinics and health screenings, adult education scholarships, high school equivalency diplomas, drug and alcohol counseling programs, summer lunch programs, swim lessons, and recreational activities.¹³⁷ The center was previously operated by a non-profit corporation which dissolved on

¹²⁹ "City Votes to Sell Nativity Scene," *The Pantagraph*, January 29, 1980.

¹³⁰ "ACLU: Take Down Nativity," *The Pantagraph*, December 12, 1979.

¹³¹ Measuringworth.com, date accessed July 30, 2024.

¹³² "City votes to sell Nativity scene."

¹³³ Bernie Schoenburg, "City nativity scene produces controversy," *The Pantagraph*, December 13, 1979.

¹³⁴ "City votes to sell Nativity scene."

¹³⁵ "Gamma Beta to Install Miss Zazzara," *The Pantagraph*, May 19, 1968.

¹³⁶ "Women in Politics Topic for ESA," *The Pantagraph*, November 19, 1979.

¹³⁷ "Housing Authority to Sponsor Sunnyside Grant Application," *The Pantagraph*, June 17, 1980.

November 5 that year, so the center was seeking new, professional management. Lawrence Irvin, executive director of the Bloomington Housing Authority (which owned the building the center occupied), stated they needed “somebody to take over the day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts operations.”¹³⁸ The Sunnyside board met with United Way officials, the Bloomington Housing Authority, and others to develop a plan, the result of which was to ask the City of Bloomington’s Parks and Recreation Department to “take over.”¹³⁹ Glen Ekey, who was the Parks and Recreation Department director, recommended that the city was best equipped to take over. Ekey stated that it would cost his department \$40,000 per year to operate the neighborhood center. The United Way pledged to support the center with an additional \$60,000 annually. This combined with the Parks and Recreation Department’s contribution would total \$100,000, which Ekey stated would be enough to operate the center properly. Additionally, Jones and Irvin agreed that the Parks and Recreation Department could add that professional touch should it be approved for them to take over management.¹⁴⁰

However, the proposal was rejected by the city council with a vote of 3 to 2, with Jones and Mayor Buchanan voting in favor of the proposal. Council member Jesse Smart, stated that “the taxpayers of this community can’t take over every project that fails.” He did agree that the Parks and Recreation Department should be allowed to design and facilitate programs for the center, “but shouldn’t assume total operation.” Jones understood the value of the center to the community and felt bitter frustration when the council rejected the proposal for the city to take over the struggling center.¹⁴¹ She adamantly expressed to council members, “we should not turn our faces and our heads from it (Sunnyside) just because it is on the west side of town.” Despite the rejection, a proposal by Ekey was put forth to create a neighborhood council to help administer the center.¹⁴²

Undaunted by this, officials with the Housing Authority drafted a new proposal to present to the City Council. This proposal would have administrative operations of the center be assumed by the Housing Authority and have programming provided by the city’s Parks and Recreation Department and other community agencies. The cost to the taxpayers would be much less, estimated to only be \$19,000 for programming. This time, when the proposal was presented to the City Council on December 19, it was unanimously approved in a 5-0 vote. Irvin stated that the approval meant “a bright new decade coming up in the 1980s for Sunnyside.”¹⁴³ With this decision, the Housing Authority began to organize the advisory committee that had been suggested by Ekey.¹⁴⁴ By June 1980, Eva Jones was the president of the advisory committee and was working hard to address the needs of residents the neighborhood association served, and to improve the safety and quality of life of those living in Sunnyside.¹⁴⁵

On November 20, 1980, Jones was the first candidate to declare her intention to run for a position on the City Council, representing Ward Three. She stated that she had a hard time deciding whether or not to run for re-election, but “went ahead because of a ‘compelling force to serve’” and at the urging of third-ward residents.¹⁴⁶ Her opponent in the election was Hugh

¹³⁸ “Sunnyside Center,” *The Pantagraph*, November 26, 1979.

¹³⁹ “City may take over center,” *The Vidette*, November 28, 1979.

¹⁴⁰ “City says ‘No’ to Sunnyside,” *The Pantagraph*, December 11, 1979.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² “City says ‘No’ to Sunnyside,” *The Pantagraph*, December 12, 1979.

¹⁴³ “Sunnyside plan gets city’s OK,” *The Pantagraph*, December 20, 1979.

¹⁴⁴ “Sunnyside activities set; already talk of changes,” *The Pantagraph*, January 13, 1980.

¹⁴⁵ “Housing Authority to Sponsor Sunnyside Grant Application,” *The Pantagraph*, June 17, 1980.

¹⁴⁶ “Eva Jones to Seek Third-Ward Seat,” *The Pantagraph*, November 20, 1980.

Atwood, a retired information systems manager at the General Electric Co. plant in Bloomington. Atwood stated that he was not seeking a seat out of any desire to defeat Jones but wanted to be more active. He said that his position at G.E. did not allow him to serve on the council before or would have allowed him the time needed to devote to city business. “As a recent retiree, I don’t want to just sit around” Atwood stated.

Unfortunately, Jones lost the 1981 election by a 2-to-1 margin. She attributed the gap to the new ward system. She felt voter support appeared considerably different by not receiving votes from the city at large.¹⁴⁷ Following the election, Jones wrote a letter to the editor, stating that the “ward system of government must have the entire support of the citizens of Bloomington if we are to progress successfully under this approach to government.” She also warned aldermen that each of them must weigh their “special interest carefully against the overall objective and goals of the City of Bloomington” so to avoid chronic deadlock that would hinder the progress and economic welfare of the community.¹⁴⁸

Desiring to continue to serve her community, Jones once again attempted to run for a position on the Bloomington Board of Education in 1983. She was one of four candidates vying for two open seats, which were two-year terms.¹⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Jones was unsuccessful, losing by 30 votes.¹⁵⁰

As a pursuer of knowledge and justice, Jones was a lifelong learner. She continued to gain invaluable skills and a better understanding of the world around her through the various experiences she had in elected positions and through community service. Additionally, Jones once again enrolled to attend classes at ISU in 1982. That spring semester she took a business course.¹⁵¹

In 1983, Jones won several recognitions for her dedicated efforts to promote and advance human relations and human rights. That year she received the Bloomington-Normal Human Relations Award from the Bloomington Human Relations Commission, recognized at the 7th Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. program at Illinois State University on March 19.¹⁵² At the end of the year, Jones was one of eight people statewide to receive the Illinois Municipal Human Relations Association Inc. annual award.¹⁵³ Both awards acknowledged Jones for her service to the District 87 School Board, Bloomington City Council, the city’s Planning Commission, and being an original member of the Bloomington Human Relations Committee in 1972. They also recognized her active membership in community organizations such as the YWCA, the League of Women Voters, United Way, her membership at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, and her former presidency of the Normal-Champaign chapter of LINKS Incorporated.¹⁵⁴

Jones was truly a worthy recipient of the local and national human relations awards. She remained an active advocate in community affairs and human relations, voicing concern when she felt individuals were underrepresented and without a voice in a variety of spheres. In 1983, she voiced concern about community impact when WGLT, the public radio station owned by

¹⁴⁷ “Bloomington winners pleased,” *The Pantagraph*, April 8, 1981.

¹⁴⁸ “Ward system faces challenge,” *The Pantagraph*, April 13, 1981.

¹⁴⁹ “School races ballot slots determined,” *The Pantagraph*, September 14, 1983.

¹⁵⁰ “3 Join, 2 Say for District 87,” *The Pantagraph*, November 9, 1983.

¹⁵¹ Academic Record for Eva Gaiter, ISU Registrar’s Office, email correspondence between Madison Heiser and Cameo Good, July 2, 2024.

¹⁵² “King Awards Presented,” *The Vidette*, March 21, 1983; “Community awards recipients named,” *The Pantagraph*, March 12, 1983.

¹⁵³ “B-N Woman Gets State Award,” *The Pantagraph*, December 14, 1983.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Illinois State University, changed the format and airtime of the *Ebony Affair* program.¹⁵⁵ The program, which had been on air since 1969, played urban contemporary music and featured cultural and historical segments on the roots of Black music and prominent Black figures.¹⁵⁶ In September 1983, WGLT decided to make several program changes in an effort to increase listenership, which included moving the *Ebony Affair* to Saturday evenings from 8:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. (cutting it down from airing Mondays through Thursdays from 10:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m.), and renaming the program to make it more appealing to a broader audience. Essentially, they canceled the program. *Ebony Affair* staff were understandably upset over this decision as they had not been consulted and the entire staff of the show resigned.¹⁵⁷ Dwight Brooks, former coordinator of the *Ebony Affair*, stated that “WGLT staff does not like *Ebony Affair* because they do not like the music. They have been trying to get rid of it for a long time.”¹⁵⁸ Additionally, Brooks stated that if WGLT was seriously committed “to the needs of the black students,” they would have consulted the programs staff.¹⁵⁹ Terry Bush, development director of WGLT, responded to this criticism by stating that the goal of initially altering the program was to improve listenership overall to the station, that this was not a racial issue. Bush went on to say that he had nothing against the program, aside from the name which he said limited audience appeal.¹⁶⁰ Jones and the ISU chapter President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) joined the dialogue, seeking a compromise with the station.¹⁶¹

In October a committee was formed in an attempt to reach a compromise between WGLT staff and *Ebony Affair*. After much discussion and debate, the decision was made between the two sides to incorporate urban contemporary music into a jazz program that would be aired six nights a week from 10:00 p.m. until 1:00 a.m., with an additional show on Sundays from 8:00 p.m. until 1:00 a.m. Some former *Ebony Affair* staffers and members of the Black student body were leery of this change. Ted Chapman, a music consultant for *Ebony Affair* stated that “you can’t mix jazz as WGLT defines it, with urban contemporary, as the students define it. It just will not work.” Jones expressed a need to have “a new staff of announcers trained to play both urban contemporary and jazz in order to make the program more effective.”¹⁶²

The new program format was supposed to go on the air by the end of the month. However, WGLT delayed the implementation of the new programming, which outraged Black students and community members. On November 21, 126 students and community members staged a protest on ISU’s Quad against the cancellation of the *Ebony Affair* and the delayed implementation of the replacement programming. Protesters demanded to speak with WGLT General Manager Ben Paxton to voice their concerns how the needs of Black students were not being met by the radio station. Six days later, the program finally aired on November 27. Greg Gordon, president of the ISU chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. was not happy with the choice of music WGLT had chosen to play in the new show, stating that it was “not the true concept of urban contemporary” members of the Black community were looking for. However, he was hopeful because Paxton and WGLT

¹⁵⁵ “A New Program to be Implemented on WGLT,” *The Vidette*, October 26, 1983.

¹⁵⁶ “Committee Attempts to Reinstate Program,” *The Vidette*, October 21, 1983; “Radio changes irk students,” *The Pantagraph*, November 22, 1983; “‘Ebony Affair’ airtime to increase on WGLT,” *The Vidette*, September 17, 1980.

¹⁵⁷ “‘Ebony Affair’ staff resigns from WGLT,” *The Vidette*, September 2, 1983.

¹⁵⁸ “WGLT not supportive says ‘Ebony’ director,” *The Vidette*, October 12, 1983.

¹⁵⁹ “Committee attempts to reinstate program.”

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ “A New Program to be Implemented on WGLT.”

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

staff had enlisted the help of Dwight Brooks, the former *Ebony Affair* coordinator, on creating the unnamed program's play list. Gordon felt the program would improve with Brooks' help.¹⁶³

Consistently demonstrating a dedication to her community, Jones ran for public office again, this time for mayor of Bloomington in 1985.¹⁶⁴ However, voter turnout for the primary was low, with only 18 percent of registered voters going to the polls. Jones finished third in the primary behind Jesse Smart. While her Mayoral attempt proved unsuccessful, she supported Smart, whom she had served with on the city council. With her endorsement, Smart gained the faith of those who had supported Jones and won the election.¹⁶⁵

After a life filled with service to her community and church, Eva Jones passed away at Bloomington's Mennonite Hospital on July 19, 1987, at the age of 57 after a long battle with cancer. Her funeral was held at Eastview Christian Church, with the Reverend Frank McSwain officiating.¹⁶⁶ She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.

By: Madison Hieser, 2024.

Edits and additions: Candace Summers, 2024

¹⁶³ "WGLT, Ebony Affair group reach consensus," *The Vidette*, December 5, 1983.

¹⁶⁴ "Pierce, Smart Get Nod in Bloomington," *The Pantagraph*, February 27, 1985.

¹⁶⁵ "Bloomington Elects Smart," *The Pantagraph*, February 27, 1985.

¹⁶⁶ "Twin City Civic Leader Dies Following Illness," *The Pantagraph*, July 22, 1987.