

Eva Mae Gaiter Jones (1930-1987)

Eva Mae Gaiter was born in Wilson, Arkansas on March 15, 1930, she was the eldest child of James and Tommie Lee (Dearing) Gaiter. She spent most of her childhood growing up in Frenchmans Bayou, Arkansas.

The family lived in Troy, Arkansas starting in 1940, where James worked on a farm. 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. When Eva was not in the field picking cotton, she and her brothers attended a small one-teacher, one-room school.

Eva's parents relocated the family to Bloomington, Illinois in 1944. 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.

The Gaiter children transitioned into the Bloomington public school system, which was quite different from their previous school in Arkansas. Eva attended eighth grade at the Horatio G. Bent School and the following year, entered Bloomington High School. 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.

Jones was also active in the Union Baptist church, where she was a member of the state Sunday school and Baptist Training Union Congress. Outside of her church activities, she volunteered with various YWCA programs such as the YWCA annual holiday observance in 1945. 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. 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.

After graduating, Jones was unable to find employment, so she moved back to Bloomington in 1951. From 1951-1952, Jones was enrolled as a full-time student in business education courses at Illinois State Normal University (today Illinois State University). She met her future husband, fellow student James "Jimmie" Allen Baker Jones, during her time at ISNU.

Jimmie was born on April 25, 1931, in Huntsville, Missouri, and raised in Springfield, Illinois. 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. Eva and Jimmie married on June 28, 1952. Jimmie left school to serve in the United States Army during the **Korean War**. Upon his return, Jimmie resumed courses and his position on the basketball team from 1954-1955 but did not earn a degree.

The couple had seven children; Judy, Deborah, Sharon, James Rodney, Ronnie James, Christopher "Cris," and Tawanda "TJ."

Eva Jones remained active in Union Baptist Church. She generously shared her time and musical talents with numerous church programs, primarily working with youth. While Jones served as head of the Youth Department at the 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, actors portraying Black historical figures, guest speakers, and choirs.

Jones was actively involved in many community **initiatives** and contributed to various causes through **facilitation** roles and volunteering her musical abilities. 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. 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.” 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.

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 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.

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**.

Jones knew that actions would speak louder than words. 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,” 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. 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.”

While she lost that first election, Jones was determined to obtain a seat, especially since racial tensions continued to increase at the high school, with students not feeling safe at their own school. She ran again in 1971, and this time Jones was the top vote-getter, winning a seat on the school board.

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.

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.”

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. 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.

Jones endured criticisms such as being labeled a “**sellout**” by other members of the Black community. 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 Bloomington Education Association (teacher’s **union**) 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 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.

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. She was also **unanimously** elected school board President and served from 1977-1978, becoming the first Black school board president for the district. During her third term, Jones continued to address concerns of all voices, listening to parents, teachers, and students in her commitment to the district.

In 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. Jones believed her experiences on the school board would be valuable in making council decisions that affected both the city and schools. She won a seat by a margin of 11 votes, winning runner-up to incumbent Jesse Smart in the primary. Both Jones and Smart were highly endorsed as qualified candidates for the two open **at-large** City Council positions due to their extensive experience serving Bloomington. With this win, Eva Jones became the first Black person elected to the Bloomington City Council. 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. She ran again in 1981, this time seeking to represent the Third ward of Bloomington but lost by a 2-to-1 margin.

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. At the end of the year, Jones was one of eight people statewide to receive the Illinois **Municipal Human**

Relations Association Inc. annual award. She was also recognized in her active membership in community organizations such as the YWCA, the **League of Women Voters**, and the **United Way**.

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. She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois.