

PRESENTATION OF W. ELLISON CHALMERS MEMORIAL AWARD

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY ACLU

TO: HENRIETTA DEBOER

In thinking about the reasons for the selection of Henrietta for this award, I was reminded of a portion of the Passover Service, celebrating the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. A part of the service enumerates the many things which God did to help them in their flight to freedom - and it goes like this:

If he had brought us forth from Egypt and had not inflicted judgment upon the Egyptians it would have been sufficient;

If he had inflicted justice upon them and had not divided the sea for us - it would have been sufficient;

If he had divided the sea for us and not made us pass through on dry land - it would have been sufficient;

And so it goes for a list of 14 or so bounties bestowed upon them - (~~and for those scholars out there - I know I have taken some liberties with the order~~) -

But so it is with Henrietta - in her service to Civil Liberties and Civil Rights in this community for which she is being honored.

If she had fought for freedom from search and seizure and not for freedom of speech - it would have been sufficient;

If she had fought for freedom of speech and not for freedom of association - it would have been sufficient;

If she had fought for Civil Liberties and not for Civil Rights - it would have been sufficient;

And within Civil Rights it is the same - to a list far greater than the 14 for which the Jews were grateful.

There is no area of Civil Liberties or Civil Rights in which she has not worked. She was involved in every effort in these communities in these areas. Was it the change in the treatment of minorities in C-U hospitals? She was there. Was it the establishment of Human Relations Commissions? She was there. Was it disparate treatment in the courts? She was there. Was it for free speech on the University campus? She was there too. And it was not that she signed a petition or a check - she did indeed do that; but that was the least of her contributions.

She talked, she researched, she initiated programs, actions, breathed life in them; organized them, recruited for them. And she bedeviled meetings - of both public and private groups - almost always in the most gentle and disarming way. A characteristic she ~~shared~~ had with Bill was that rare ability to put the knife in so gently - that the opponent never knew it had happened -- until it was too late.

And she did not waste her time talking to the committed. She approached the most unapproachable. She even dared to challenge her own church on the issue of discrimination. And the most unlikely people found themselves listening and gradually changing - They were disarmed. She did not concern herself with "community acceptance" of herself.

Early in her time in this community - she was held to be a "RADICAL" by virtue of her association with her husband, John DeBoer, himself an advocate of equality and justice. Then the community discovered she had that title - by their definition - in her own right.

As I think back - the only thing I can think of in which Henrietta did not personally participate - was the "testing" of Barbershops - then for men only - in their refusals to provide services for Blacks - and I think she was in on the planning for that.

It depends on which side you were on - whether she was a Thorn in the Flesh, an Intolerable goad - or the conscience of the community. We celebrate here - not a particular event or contribution -- but a life.

Her living here has made a difference and all for the better. Minorities who buy houses freely, people who do not have to sign loyalty oaths; everyone who exercises the rights of freedom of speech and assembly --ALL owe her a debt.

We celebrate and honor a life lived in commitment -- with a passion for justice and a determination to live and act so as to insure that justice was secured for everyone.

Henrietta - you and Bill were friends, you were colleagues - and you were often - co-conspirators. He held you dearly and it is a special pleasure to me to give you this award in his name.

Plaque:
The W. Ellison Chalmers
Memorial Award

to
Henrietta A. DeBoer
For service to the
Community and to the
Cause of Civil Rights
and Civil Liberties

Champaign
County Chapter
of the A. C. L. U.

With
Love to
Hazel & Sealy