Edith Savage-Jennings

In her decades as a civil rights advocate, Trenton, NJ activist Edith Savage-Jennings has had a front-row seat to history—and even more importantly, she has made history.

When she was 10 years old, Edith Savage-Jennings was asked by the New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs to present flowers to then-first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. She was told not to say anything, but she couldn’t resist the temptation, and said, “I want to thank you for being so nice to colored people.” That marked the beginning of a relationship between Edith Savage-Jennings and Eleanor Roosevelt that lasted until Mrs. Roosevelt’s death in 1962. The two were pen pals.

When she was 13, Edith Savage-Jennings did not want to sit in the balcony of the Capitol Theater in Trenton, where Blacks were supposed to sit. She was afraid of heights. So she and a group of about ten friends from the NAACP Youth Chapter, including former NY Mayor David Dinkins and Dr. Leslie Hayling of Trenton, took a seat in the second row on the main floor and refused to move despite an usher and the manager reprimanding her. “We sat through the whole show and never moved. And the next week we went back to make sure we could sit in those same seats and nobody said anything. We integrated the Capitol Theater.”

In early 1956, not long after taking her famous seat on the bus, and at the invitation of Edith Savage-Jennings, Rosa Parks came to speak at the Mt Zion AME Church in Trenton. Until the day Ms Parks passed, they shared a profound friendship and collaboration in the struggle for civil rights. Ms Parks referred to Ms Savage-Jennings as her daughter.

In 1957, Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Rev. S Howard Woodson, Pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Trenton, and asked for his assistance in raising funds for the movement. Rev Woodson then asked Edith Savage-Jennings to help. Ms Savage-Jennings organized a major civil rights rally and fundraiser for the benefit of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at Shiloh Baptist Church where the late Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the invited speaker. From then on, Rev. Dr. King and his wife Coretta Scott King worked closely together with Ms Savage-Jennings who became a close family
friend and adviser. It was not uncommon for Dr. King to call her late at night to ask her opinion of some action he was contemplating.

President John F. Kennedy in July of 1963 asked Edith Savage-Jennings if she would go on a secret mission to Jackson, Mississippi. She and Helen Meyner, wife of then Governor Robert Meyner, were asked to team together to meet with influential white women of Jackson to defuse tensions for first graders in peaceful integration. Unfortunately, President Kennedy was assassinated prior to their arrival. Immediately after the assassination, the newly-appointed President Lyndon Johnson reached out to Edith Savage-Jennings to request her to continue with the the President Kennedy’s secret mission. As a result, in 1964, Edith Savage-Jennings, as spokeswoman, and Helen Meyner, Black and White, traveled to Jackson to fulfill their promise. They succeeded. A second part of the secret mission was most dangerous. They were to go to Hattiesburg, Mississippi to visit student civil rights activists who had been jailed, and were unable to communicate with the outside world, including their parents. At great personal risk, Edith Savage-Jennings led the visit to the students. She was not allowed to bring anything into the cells, including paper. The students were secretly advised to write messages on tissue. Creatively, she hid the tissue in her bosom clothing., and successfully brought out news to the Movement, and to the parents.

Later, Edith Savage-Jennings was invited to become part of a group of Black and White women, organized by the National Council of Negro Women, who worked behind the scenes with women in Mississippi to end segregation. That quiet revolution became known as “Wednesdays in Mississippi”. To date, Edith Savage-Jennings has been an actual guest of the White House under ten Presidents, beginning with President Roosevelt and through to President Obama.

Over the years, Edith Savage-Jennings has mentored women and youth, and played integral roles in organizations, both locally and nationally. Some of these include Southern Christian Leadership Conference, NAACP, Urban League and many more. Edith Savage Jennings’ reach was not only national but international. Hoping to find a way to help Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, she lobbied then New Jersey Gov Kean to use his national presence to address South African apartheid through boycotts. A year and a half after the boycott movement took hold, Nelson Mandela was released.

On the morning of the day that he would be assassinated, Dr. King called to ask Edith Savage-Jennings to remain close with his wife and children should anything happen to him. And indeed, she and Coretta Scott King remained close friends and confidantes until Mrs. King passed. Together they had traveled
the country to raise the cause of civil rights and the funds for the Martin Luther King, Jr Center that would be built in Atlanta, and on which board Ms Savage-Jennings participated for over 25 years. Referring to the close ties to the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, jr. and Mrs King, "It was a relationship I can't really explain," says Edith Savage-Jennings.

To this day, the 90-year-old Civil Rights Icon, Edith Savage-Jennings believes racism must be confronted and called out whenever or wherever it occurs. "I am not always liked, but you have to be true to yourself in order to be true to everybody else. If you’re in a situation where you see prejudice is really shown or happening, speak up!"