

Grace Huddleston Stewart (1910-1996) became known throughout Bloomington after she brought a **fair housing** complaint to the Bloomington Human Relations Committee during the summer of 1967. She attempted to rent an apartment and was denied because of the color of her skin. She sought the help of the local chapter of the **NAACP** because she felt that she should be able to live wherever she wished. It was her **perseverance** that helped set things in motion to finally get a fair housing ordinance passed in Bloomington.

Grace Huddleston Stewart was born on August 15, 1910, to Daniel Huddleston and Mabel Johnson in Bloomington. She lived with her mother at 604 S. Madison St. before moving to 915 E. Empire St. around 1917. She recalled that the area “wasn’t all built up out there then. It was nothing but pasture.” Grace attended schools in Bloomington through high school, but it is not known if she graduated.

Grace did not have much experience with **segregation** as a child. She recalled that she was “never brought up in an all-Black neighborhood or Black school. Always went to school with whites. And lived in neighborhoods that was mixed. And I never knew nothing about all this stuff until I’d go to Chicago to visit, and I thought it was so strange to see nothing [but] Black people.... I had never seen nothing like that before [...]” According to Grace, her mother controlled her movements much of the time. “I had very strict parents, my mother especially. She didn’t allow us kids to go nowhere—church and school, church and school.” Because Grace had limited opportunities to be out and about, it is possible that she avoided much of the racial segregation at restaurants and shows. “Now maybe my mother had known what was going on...,” she added.

Grace married George Stewart on March 1, 1928 when she was 17 years old. Twenty-four years her senior, George was a **World War I** veteran and a member of the all-Black Redd-Williams Post of the **American Legion**. When they first met around 1928, George worked as a post office clerk in downtown Bloomington, an unusual occupation for a Black man at that time. They traveled for several years after they were married, but then returned to Bloomington.

Well into the 1950s, Black students could attend Illinois State Normal University (today known as Illinois State University) but were not allowed to live or dine on campus. During that time, Stewart and other local African American families opened their homes to help house those students. As early as 1940, Grace Stewart housed primarily Black women who attended ISNU and continued housing students until the late 1960s. She later switched to housing boys, which she stated, “was worse, I think.”

Eldridge “Skip” Gilbert, Jr. first encountered Stewart in the cafeteria at Illinois Wesleyan University in August 1963 during football training. Soon, Gilbert met Carl Sneed (an ISNU freshman) and the two were introduced to Stewart’s boarders—two freshman football players at ISNU. The foursome became fast friends and often hung out at Stewart’s home. Later in life, the two men fondly remembered their “Bonus Mother.” Sneed emphasized that “Mrs. Stewart’s positive impact on Skip, me, and other young black men and women was lasting and unrecognized by many in the general population.”

Stewart enjoyed a long **culinary** career. In 1955, she began working in the cafeteria at Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU). Five years later, she was the head baker there. When asked where her cooking talent came from, Stewart shared that “[W]e always had something to do. [...] I’d get up with [my mother] in the morning, [...] and I’d help fix the breakfast [...] and I guess it just come natural to me.” Stewart regularly worked 12 to 14-hour days at IWU that often began at two o’clock in the morning.

On May 25, 1959, George passed away at the age of 73 and was buried in Bloomington's Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. He and Grace had been married for 31 years.

Although she claimed to have never experienced segregation as a child, Stewart certainly encountered it as an adult. In 1967, Stewart was looking for an apartment to rent. When she responded to a newspaper advertisement offering an apartment for rent, she learned that there were two apartments, not just one, for rent at that location. The real estate agent's secretary showed her one apartment, but said she would have to make an appointment with the agent to see the other. Stewart left her phone number, but did not receive a call back. After a few days, a white **civil rights** worker Ralph L. Smith, chairman of the Housing Committee for the Bloomington Branch of the NAACP, called the office to inquire about the apartment. He was told that the other apartment was still available for rent.

As a result, Stewart submitted a housing **discrimination** complaint to the Bloomington Human Relations Commission on May 6, 1967. The complaint "accused a city real estate agent with not renting a unit in an apartment house to her because of her race."

Shortly afterward, Smith reached out to the head of the Illinois Department of Education and Registration. In a letter dated May 14, Smith wrote that, "Bloomington does not have an open-occupancy **ordinance** (although the commission presented the council with one six months ago), and for that reason we are turning to your office for whatever relief you can give in this matter." Smith believed that the existing real estate licensing code could be applied to **remedy** Stewart's situation.

Several days later and after learning of her **allegation**, an office representative visited with Stewart. The agent said the apartment was about to be rented, but they had another property elsewhere. Unfortunately, this house did not meet her needs. It was too large for Stewart, who wanted an apartment. It would have cost her \$140 per month (or \$1,100 a month in 2020). Based on this evidence, Human Relations Commission chairperson Thomas F. Jones requested an investigation.

The agent claimed that he was unaware that the apartment house manager had promised the apartments to other parties, which supposedly explained why he told Smith that the apartment was available. Commission member Dr. Benjamin Hubbard reacted to this information by saying, "This is the best documentive [sic] case we've had. I feel this is one which should be added to the files." Indeed, of the complaints received by the commission in the prior two years, this was the first one involving a real estate company. At its June 12, 1967 meeting, the eight-member Human Relations Commission unanimously voted to forward the complaint to the Bloomington City Council "for possible criminal action."

Work had been underway to eliminate housing discrimination in Bloomington for years. The Bloomington City Council had passed a fair housing resolution four years earlier. In December 1966, the chairman of the Bloomington Commission on Human Relations had submitted the first version of the ordinance to city council "for their immediate consideration." This original ordinance applied to anyone, including owners and lending institutions, who offered real estate for sale or rent, and called for fines and imprisonment for those guilty of housing discrimination. The city council voted to refer the ordinance to the Corporation Counsel for review.

More than six months later, on July 10, 1967, Corporation Counsel James R. DePew presented his report on the proposed ordinance. He acknowledged that there were similar ordinances in other Illinois cities, but recommended that the ordinance be less strict. DePew's revised ordinance only applied to real estate brokers, which **municipalities** were allowed to

regulate. It also eliminated fines and jail time for guilty parties. Instead, brokers would merely lose their licenses. Furthermore, it did not apply to individuals selling or renting property.

Public reaction to the weak ordinance was critical. An editorial in the *Pantagraph* stated, “It is a legally safe ordinance. It may be an **adequate** ordinance. It is not the best ordinance [...]. The enforcement of any fair housing ordinance is difficult [...]. But the moral weight of a broad open occupancy law [...] cannot be overlooked. This moral weight, this clear statement of what is right, should apply to owners of property as well as their agents.” During the public comment period at the next council meeting on July 24, Bloomington-Normal NAACP President Merlin Kennedy called the revised ordinance “so ineffective that it would be completely worthless.” Rev. Jack Newsome called it “a step in the right direction, but only barely so.” At the conclusion of debate, Councilmember Frank Hartenstein moved that the original 1966 ordinance submitted by the Human Relations Commission be passed. Council unanimously voted to pass the ordinance, resulting in applause from the local NAACP delegation. Merlin Kennedy was **astonished** at this unexpected win, which finally made housing discrimination illegal in Bloomington.

Furthermore, this landmark legislation “assure[d] equal opportunity to all residents, regardless of race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry, to live in decent, sanitary and healthful living quarters; in order that the peace, health, safety and general welfare of all the inhabitants of the city may be protected and insured.” It prohibited discrimination based on the above-mentioned qualities in the area of financing, rental and purchasing decisions, real estate advertisements, among others. Finally, and the piece that would most affect Stewart’s situation, “It shall be unlawful for an owner or his agent to refuse to sell or rent property because of race, color, religion or national origin.”

The resolution of Stewart’s specific complaint remains unclear. However, the passage of Bloomington’s fair housing ordinance ensured that future allegations of housing discrimination would be taken seriously and carry the full weight of the law.

Grace Huddleston Stewart died at 10:00 a.m. on September 21, 1996 at OSF St. Joseph Medical Center in Bloomington. Graveside services, led by Rev. Julia Smith of Christ Temple Church, were held six days later at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Stewart’s ashes rest in a niche in the cemetery’s mausoleum.