

# RUTH ELLIS

## Businesswoman and Senior Lesbian Activist

(1899-2000)



Ruth Ellis was born in Springfield, Illinois to parents who were conceived in the last years of slavery. Her life spanned through moments of great turmoil and upheaval – from the Springfield Riot of 1908 to the Detroit Riots of 1967 – an endless backdrop of conflict from which Ellis managed to extract an exuberance for life that was incandescent. She came out as a lesbian at the age of 16, and earned a high school diploma at a time when fewer than seven percent of African Americans graduated from secondary school. In 1936 she met her partner of 34 years, Ceciline "Babe" Franklin, with whom she moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1937. Ellis became the first African American woman to own an off-set printing business in that city. Her success as an entrepreneur from 1946 to 1971 inspired the couple to turn the home they shared into the "Gay Spot" where young gays and lesbians could congregate and enjoy a welcoming night club atmosphere decades before the Civil Rights Movement and the Stonewall Riot would begin to alter their outlook and options. Ellis became a fierce advocate for African Americans, senior citizens, and the gay and lesbian communities. She offered assistance to lesbians of color researching their history and their roots; she proposed a variation on Big Brothers Big Sisters, where younger gays and lesbians would be matched as social companions with gay and lesbian seniors according to similar interests; and the Ruth Ellis Center, founded in 1999, continues to provide shelter and aid for LGBTQ youth in Detroit. Her extraordinary life was chronicled in the acclaimed documentary *Living With Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100* (1999) and the city of Detroit recognizes her contributions every February, during Black History Month, by celebrating Ruth Ellis Day. She died in her sleep at her home on October 5, 2000, at the age of 101.

### Lesson Plan

#### LEVEL 1: CONTRIBUTIONS APPROACH

1. Activate prior experience: What do you know about Ruth Ellis, an advocate for senior citizens, African Americans, and gays and lesbians?
2. Read the biographical information found at this link: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth\\_Ellis\\_%28activist%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth_Ellis_%28activist%29)
3. Group Discussion: Describe her contributions to investigating gay and lesbian history and providing social companions to seniors.

#### LEVEL 2: ADDITIVE APPROACH

1. In viewing the Ellis's history and struggles with civil rights, how had her "senior years" brought a fulfilling life in activism? Listen to Ruth Ellis explanation of her life in <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/100years.html>
2. How did Ellis create her "living with pride" in being a lesbian and advocate for others to find their own life? View the documentary "*Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100*" at this link: [www.sistersinthelife.com](http://www.sistersinthelife.com)
3. Website Investigation: How did other African American lesbian activists become role models for others? Choose one activist from <http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/Afr-AmerBlack.html> Describe any similarities to being a "wise elder" for others.

#### LEVEL 3: TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACH

1. Investigate Ellis's early life and discuss her family struggles. How did Ellis cope with these obstacles? View this link at <http://www.utne.com/Politics/Ruth-Ellis-Americas-Oldest-Lesbian.aspx#axzz2fG1zoewQ>
2. How did Ellis's acknowledgement of her own sexual orientation enable her to support other gay and lesbians? View this link at [http://www.sistersinthelife.com/ruthellis/coming\\_of\\_age.html](http://www.sistersinthelife.com/ruthellis/coming_of_age.html)
3. What attributes enabled Ellis to imprint the gay and lesbian community?

#### LEVEL 4: SOCIAL ACTION APPROACH

1. Ellis is honored as a "foremother" who has provided alternatives for African American gays and lesbians in the Midwest. Describe other individuals who have created that "safe place" today in our society. View this link on LGBT History Month at <http://lgbthistorymonth.com/ruth-ellis>
2. Based upon the organizations that were founded in Ellis's name, describe the impact that this role model of 101 years of age has had on our generations today? View this link at <http://ishouldbeloathing.blogspot.com/2009/10/lgbt-history-month-ruth-ellis.html>
3. How have you been inspired to create your legacy for equality?