



Lillian Gill

Father: Johnson Buress

Mother: Elizabeth Buress

Born: January 3, 1917

Death: September 13, 2014.

Lillian Gill was born on a farm in Tupelo, Mississippi. With six older brothers, she was the first and only girl as her mother died giving birth to her.

Attending high school in nearby Baldwin, Mississippi, Lillian admired her Home Economics teacher and said, “. . . that was the person that motivated me because I never had another image of a girl in my family; it was all boys.” Lillian graduated from a “training school” in Tupelo, Mississippi. Later, when she was working, she continued to take classes at various local colleges and universities.

Soon after graduating from high school, Lillian married Robert Earl Gill and moved to the “city,” Tupelo, which was destroyed by a tornado in the summer 1936. Remembering that storm, she said, “It was traumatic. It was the only time I ever saw whites and blacks together.” Before the storm, Lillian had had one son, Robert. Because there was no work left for him, Lillian’s husband hopped a train with a friend and headed north. They ended up in Grand Rapids, MI, only because his companion had relatives there. Lillian soon followed, and they had two more children—a girl, Frances, who had been conceived in Mississippi and born in Michigan, and another son, Kenneth. In 1944, at the age of 29, her husband Robert died.

Lillian’s father, a retired carpenter, and his third wife soon moved to Grand Rapids to care for the children while Lillian worked. Because it was wartime, she had been hired at Hayes Manufacturing Co., repairing parachutes. Her husband had never wanted Lillian to work outside of the home, but she had been taking the bus to work and making more money than her husband who had worked at a foundry. Lillian had been able to save \$300 for a down payment on a house on Franklin Street. The house cost \$2,500, and her monthly mortgage payments were \$25.

In 1946, the factory closed. Lillian then converted her new home into a rooming house. She said most of the rooms were rented to men who were relatives. They paid \$7 a week.

From 1946 to 1959, Lillian did “day work” and took classes to learn about life insurance and underwriting. Then in 1959, she began selling life insurance full time for the next 22 ½ years. In 1982, Lillian became the first black woman in Grand Rapids and the entire state to retire from selling life insurance. In 1953, Lillian also started selling Nutralite Food Supplement as she traveled to augment her income. In 1956, she became the first black agent—woman or man—for Richard De Vos and Jay Van Andel as they founded Amway.

In addition to traveling throughout 37 states and the Bahamas for work during the week, Lillian traveled a great deal for the International Masons and Eastern Star on the weekends. She attended conventions and in 1955 became the leadership trainee teacher. After she retired, Lillian proofread literature for the Order of the Eastern Star.

In 1951, Lillian started volunteering for the NAACP and the Urban League. That year, during the presidential campaign, she was chosen to present flowers to Mrs. Harry Truman at a “whistle stop” in downtown Grand Rapids. Lillian served as vice president to three different presidents of the local chapter of the NAACP. She was also one of two black women golfers who first played the Grand Rapids Indian Trails Golf Course.

Her other volunteer service included playing the organ for 15 years for her church choir and acting as president of the Sunday School Congress for the District of Michigan for 32 years. Lillian was also a volunteer “liaison for schools,” helping parents whose children had dropped out of school.

Among her many awards were the 1986 Giant Award, for her religious service, and the A. C. Talbott Award, for her role as a school liaison.

Finally, in addition to her many talents, Lillian Gill was a poet. A poem that she wrote for her grandsons seems to summarize her worldview, values, and life principles. Titled a *Tribute for the Boys and Girls*, it goes as follows: (scroll down)

What makes successful boys and girls,
Not those who always cheat and fight,
But those who try to do what's right
Will become the leaders in our sight.
Not ethnic color, black nor white
But those who stand for civic pride
And let their parents and teachers be their guide.
Yes, you can be leaders, strong and grand,
Then you will have our nation stand.
Work with others hand in hand
And become good citizens of our land.
Remember, if you want to succeed in our nation,
You must study and complete your education.
Stay in school, learn the golden rule
And you will have strength to keep your cool.

Other Resources

http://www.ggrwhc.org/uploads/files/newsletters/Newsletter_for_the_web_2.pdf

<http://obits.mlive.com/obituaries/grandrapids/obituary.aspx?pid=172504062>