

Remembering the Historic Life of Louise Elizabeth Buie

Congressman Hastings delivered the following statement on Decemeber 8, 2003, remembering the historic life of Louise Elizabeth Buie:

"Mr. Speaker, I rise today to celebrate the life of Louise Elizabeth Buie, who died on December 2, 2003. This diminutive woman, known throughout her home state of Florida and beyond for her contributions to the civil rights movement in America, packed the equivalent of two lifetimes into her 89 years.

"Beginning in the 1930s, Louise Buie, as a member of her local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), fought against segregation in its many forms. She served as president of the branch for fourteen years during the 1950s and '60s and was at the forefront of every battle to integrate schools, hospitals and restaurants. It was Louise Buie who demanded that black baseball players be allowed to room with their white teammates in West Palm Beach, and it was Louise Buie who insisted that West Palm Beach, Riviera Beach and other cities in South Florida hire African-Americans as police officers and firefighters. Previously, those municipalities had restricted people of her race to jobs as janitors and laborers.

"Louise's voice and dynamic personality were ever-present in seventy years of struggles over school desegregation and dozens of other disputes involving employment discrimination and demands for equal rights for all citizens. At a time when black citizens were denied admittance to most of the county's hospitals, she ignored the skepticism of her fellow African-Americans and started the fight that resulted in the desegregation of Palm Beach County's major medical facilities. When her grandchildren wanted to go the beach during a time period when beaches were restricted to whites, Louise took her grandchildren anyway. Although she was arrested for her actions, Louise prevailed, and the beaches were opened to all citizens.

"It was Louise Buie who forced the abolition of the Palm Beach County school district's "all white" textbooks that excluded any mention of the history and contributions of African-Americans in our nation. She was also at the forefront of the movement that brought courses in black history to the curriculum of Palm Beach County schools. As time went by, more and more of the barriers to full participation in our society were broken down by the efforts of this amazing woman.

"Mr. Speaker, there is a song that is often chanted at protest marches and rallies. It begins, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn us around." That sums up the life of Louise Buie. No one ever turned her around.

"Although Louise was best known and most often honored for her civil rights work, she didn't confine herself to battles for the betterment of the lives of black citizens. Anywhere there was injustice, Louise could be counted on to speak out and assist those whose rights were infringed upon. She became known as the little lady with the big heart.

"Her lifetime of fighting against injustice won her innumerable friends and admirers among

people of all races and every economic stratum, including myself. Opponents of segregation came to recognize her as a formidable adversary and eventually realized the futility of holding to their outdated views. Elected officials and other powerful people respected her opinions and welcomed her input and wise counsel.

"I knew "Mrs. L.E. Buie," as she called herself, for a very long time. I cannot possibly calculate the immense value of all that I learned from her. As with so many other people she met in her lifetime, she was an enormous influence on me. I know how proud she was of my election to Congress, seeing that victory as validation of her decades-long effort to raise African-Americans to a level equal to that of white citizens. Nevertheless, we both knew, and I still know, that America has a long way to go.

"Two years ago, in an effort to convince a local town to adopt the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday for its citizens, Louise Buie, at age 87, walked a mile with other marchers and stood on the steps of the town hall through more than an hour of speeches. When one of my long-time staff members, who had been sitting down, later commented on her stamina, she replied, "I'm used to standing." Until a few weeks before her death, Louise Buie was still fighting battles and collecting awards. In recognition of the many lives she touched and the huge impact that she had on the people of Palm Beach County, the Urban League building in West Palm Beach is co-named for her.

"Mr. Speaker, there will never be another human being like Louise Elizabeth Buie. Her impact will be felt for generations to come. She opened many doors, often with only the strength of her personality. Because of her work, innumerable African-Americans and people of all races have walked through those doors, and we are extremely grateful for the phenomenal person that she was. Her memory will live with me always."

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