

Nellie Stone Johnson: A force for civil rights

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Nellie Stone Johnson was born December 17, 1905 to one of a few black families that settled in the rural farming communities of Dakota County at the turn of the last century.

From an early age, Johnson revealed an activist spirit, distributing leaflets for the Nonpartisan League on her way to school at age 13, and joining the Minneapolis NAACP at age 16. She eventually moved to Minneapolis, becoming a force for union and civil rights as a founding member of many of today's civic organizations, including the merger of the Minnesota Democratic Party with the Farm-Labor Party (DFL). She was also instrumental in the creation of the Minneapolis Civil Rights Commission and the State of Minnesota's Human Rights Department, the first of its kind in the nation.

Johnson also authored legislation impacting employment, union and civil rights, including the 1950 Initiative to desegregate the Armed Forces. She went on to become the first black elected official to a citywide office in Minneapolis.

Nellie Stone Johnson was highly revered and often mentored and consulted with local and national leaders, including Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Vice President Walter Mondale and Governor Rudy Perpich. She served on many boards, including our very own MUL board of directors, and was the recipient of the Cecil E. Newman Humanitarian Award and the Distinguished Minnesotan Award. She died April 2, 2002 at the age of 96. The Nellie Stone Johnson School, in North Minneapolis, was named in her honor.

In honor of our rich history and Women's Month, we salute, Nellie Stone Johnson!