

GESU CATHOLIC CHURCH - DETROIT  
& Faith Formation Commission  
Present...

# The Elders Project

*Stories of Faith, Hope & Courage*

## Introduction

*Many of our Gesu elders have incredible stories of faith, while holding onto hope and displaying incredible courage. These stories display devotion to the faith, despite facing incredible racism, even from within the church. Despite all, they have deepened their relationship with God, while strengthening their commitment to the Roman Catholic faith.*



By P. J. Edghill

# Beatrice “B” Ward



**Beatrice “B” Ward** is a hard woman to pin down. She’s busy and at the time of the interview, she was recovering from the holidays, winding down and transferring and training someone to take over her work at the Democratic Black Caucus, before heading out to Arizona to celebrate her birthday with one of her children. She squeezed this interview into 70 minutes.

Beatrice has always been a force to be reckoned with, forging her own path and making her own decisions. Her parents were Baptist, but she chose not to be baptized in the Baptist church. She attended Sacred Heart Catholic Church with a friend of her mother’s and liked it better. Eventually, as an adult, she was baptized into the Catholic Church at St. Agnes Church located at that time, at 12th and La Salle.

A life-long Detroiter, she was the only girl and the youngest after eight brothers. Two of her brothers passed early and her parents raised the remaining seven children, six in the house by the time she was coming up. Her father worked for the city of Detroit, as a bus driver. Later her mother worked at Receiving Hospital. Beatrice graduated from Northwestern High School in 1945. She was unable to get into Wayne State University

because preference was given to the returning GIs, so instead she attended Lewis Business College and received a diploma in Secretary Science and went to work for the City of Detroit as a stenographer for Judge John Gillis, in traffic court.

Beatrice married her husband, Ralph Ward, a Catholic and a Chemical Engineering student at Wayne State University, in 1949 at Sacred Heart Church. Because she had not yet been received into the church, Beatrice was not able to get married at the main altar of the church, and had to be married at a side altar. Disappointed yet undaunted she made the wedding a small family event but still managed to have a 500 person reception at the Detroit Urban League.



**Beatrice and Ralph on  
their wedding day  
1949**

Beatrice and her husband Ralph moved into a two-family home in the 12th street area, that Ralph owned, and became very involved in St. Agnes parish. They remained there until the neighborhood began to change. The priests there, Fr. Granger and Fr. Dan assisted

her in finding another area to move to that had Catholic schools, which was how the Wards arrived at Gesu in 1963.

They moved on to Wildermere south of McNichols. Beatrice says they were the first or second African American family to move on to the street. All but one of the seven Ward children attended Gesu grade school. Her oldest son Ralph graduated from Saint Agnes grade school and went on to attend Sacred Heart Seminary High School on Chicago Boulevard and when that closed he went to the Cathedral High School. However, at one point it didn't look like any of the Ward children would attend Gesu. In the Spring of 1963, prior to their move, Beatrice contacted Gesu School to enroll her second eldest school aged child, Reginald. The principal of the time said their enrollment was closed and the school didn't have any openings.

"So I had to be quite aggressive and I told her that I would have to contact the Archdiocese Of Detroit and find out why they would not accept my children into that school. Well, when I did that the Archdiocese got in touch with the principal and they were able to register my kids." Though Beatrice and her children went on to be very successful at Gesu School and throughout the Gesu community, she is candid about the fact it wasn't always easy, "when we went into that, it was a fight, I got to tell you that now. It wasn't easy getting accepted. And when you have children, they don't understand the racism thing. They're just beginning to learn what it is -they have to learn from you." Reginald started in 1964. Rodney and Rikki started in 1965. Eventually six out of seven of the Ward children, attended Gesu with Denege, Robin and Robert joining the older three. Robert was the last to graduate in 1979.

Beatrice and her husband made sure that the focus of their household was education, behavior and the future. With her husband working, she was a stay-at-home mom, and the children landed squarely in her hands. She was focused and careful in molding her children.



Beatrice credits her own parents and family for her drive to succeed. Her parents and brothers taught her a lot and gave her space to grow and become independent. When she entered Northwestern High School she was one of about a dozen blacks in the school. Her parents were very concerned, but she told them that she could handle it, "I was always a very independent person. As a young person, I was very independent, very determined to do what I wanted to do and what I felt was my right to do."



**Beatrice  
High School Graduation,  
1945**

That attitude positioned her well to make an impact on Gesu despite the earlier challenges. She went on to make many friends at Gesu and never felt uncomfortable. Beatrice says if she felt something was wrong she challenged it and moved right on, and people respected her for that attitude.



**Rikki Ward  
4th Grade**



**Denege Ward  
4th Grade**



**Robin Ward  
7th Grade**



**Robert Ward  
1st Grade**

With her children solidly in place at Gesu, Beatrice became a part of the Gesu community, working in the school, co-chairing the coordination of the lunch program for the school, as well as on the board of the education committee. Additionally, Beatrice worked in various church committees and was on the parish council for 13 years as well as volunteering to work on Mondays to record the contributions. She was asked to become the business manager for the church, but her husband, Ralph, was ill, and she couldn't do it. Many things that current Gesu parishioners take for granted were begun through Beatrice's efforts. She coordinated the use of the gym in the social hall so Gesu could be more involved with the community and the new people that were moving into the community would feel welcome. She developed a relationship with the 12th precinct to involve Gesu Church because of their close proximity, "I figured we should have a relationship and I think it was the sergeant of that precinct, he wanted to use the social hall for a retirement party. I was able to arrange that." These actions opened up the doors for Gesu to have good communications with the police department and the community. "Fr. Kehres, he had me in charge of renting the facility out, he said because you have a good communication with people. You're be able to do it... There were certain adult groups would use the gym to practice basketball, and certain groups wanted to have community meetings at the social hall, so I scheduled them for about three or four years. I started it."

Beatrice can sight the accomplishments not only of her own children but of many of the children who attended Gesu School, "So many of them did well. By working in the school, I got to know the African American children that came in, but that wasn't my only interest: it's the kids period was my interest."

Beatrice says that in the mid 1960's many of the leaders of the city of Detroit were members of Gesu Church: the Hathaways, the Cavanaghs and many more.

“How I got involved on the committees was with Jerry Cavanagh, who was the mayor of the city of Detroit at that time. He got me on those different committees in the church. That’s why I got on the committees because they were reluctant to take a black woman, a black person on those committees, but I was aggressive enough to get on them because my kids were in the school, and I wanted to be involved.”

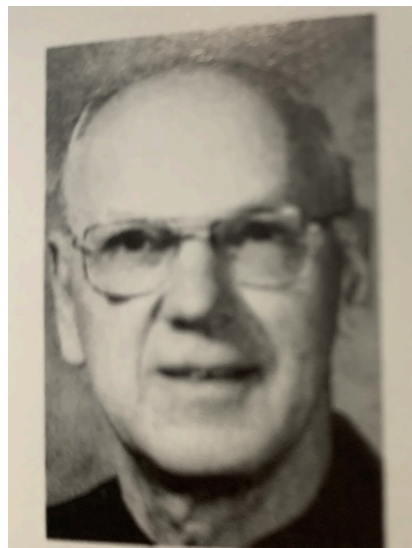
She still has relationships with many of the children of Gesu. Beatrice just helped, through her parents, granddaughter ; of Mayor Cavanagh, Mary, to become a state senator. Beatrice says many of the then children remember her working on the lunch program at Gesu. She can list many alumni and their accomplishments, “Some of them have done really well in their adult life.”

The priests at that time, Fr. Kehres, Fr. Muenzer, and Fr. O’Brian worked very closely with Beatrice, and they had a very good relationship and that’s how she made her mark on Gesu School with her family. She stayed on the committees until her last child, Robert, was done at Gesu school. Always involved in whatever school her children attended, she began phasing out of some of her work at Gesu, and working with the other schools that her kids were attending for high school. She gave every one of them at least part of her time but Beatrice never left Gesu parish and continued to work on the parish council as

**Fr. Muenzer**  
Pastor of Gesu,  
1969-1976



**Fr. Kehres**  
Pastor of Gesu,  
1976 - 1980



long as she could. At Sacred Heart Seminary School she was treasurer of the parent-teacher association when her oldest Ralph was there. She only left Gesu to become involved with Mercy High School in Farmington for her daughters, St. Mary's of Redford, and U of D Jesuit for her sons. She was also very involved with making sure that U of D Jesuit remained in the city of Detroit. It wasn't easy but she felt strongly about it because so many other schools in the metro Detroit area, she felt, were racist and based on legacy, no matter what the behavior or academics of the students. African-American students with strong academics were denied entrance. When one of the schools did accept one of her children she made a point of attending a meeting and telling them exactly why she would *not* be sending her son there, saying, "I do not want you to educate my child."

Beatrice always advocated for her children. When her daughter Denege attended Mercy High School, at that time Mercy discouraged the girls from pursuing medicine as MD's and instead encouraged nursing. Denege knew what she wanted to do and in order to get accepted to a pre-med program, she would need anatomy, which Mercy, at that time did not offer. With the help of a teacher, Mrs. Capodilupo, whose husband, taught anatomy at Mercy College, they found enough students interested in anatomy class and bussed them to Mercy College for the class so that her daughter could have the requirements for pre-med. Several years later anatomy was offered at Mercy High School.

**Denege - Mercy  
High School  
Graduation**



**Dr. Denege Ward-  
Wright**

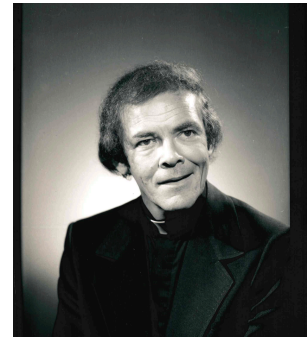


Beatrice credits many of the priests she has known throughout her life for the guidance they have given her in terms of educating her children. Priests like Fr. Muenzer, Fr. O'Brien, Fr. Kehres, Fr. Cunningham of Focus Hope and (the recently deceased) Fr. Norm Thomas of Sacred Heart. Fr. Canfield of U of D Jesuit high school, was her son Rikki's mentor and she revered him for his dedication. They were "buddies" as Beatrice says.



**Fr. William Cunningham**

**Fr. Frank Canfield SJ**



**Fr. Norm Thomas**



She did the work of getting her kids in the schools she wanted for them but those priests were generous in their support and guidance. She and her husband stressed the importance of good grades and she's proud of her children, "they did well." She counts among them a doctor, clinical psychologist with a law degree, a teacher and a few auto executives.

Beatrice rarely looks back. She is a forward thinker and mover. Everything she's done she wanted to do, "I'm just a person who likes to be - I'm aggressive. I like to do well in whatever I'm doing...And I was fortunate enough that my parents, being the only girl, I had a lot of help from my brothers and my parents to do whatever I wanted to do." Her drive and attitude has traveled down her bloodline with 32 grandchildren and great grandchildren, with many doctors and professionals among them.

Beatrice was not a casual convert to Catholicism. Though she attended a Catholic church since childhood, she did not convert until she was a young adult. She never shied away from a deep conversation with various priests in her life to further understand her faith and its impact on her life. Coming from a large family and having built a large family with her husband, Ralph, one thing she always was interested in was the issue of birth control. She knew she loved children, but was always concerned about the children in this world, who may not have been born through a loving, committed relationship. "I understood my reasoning about birth control was that's a life. I'm responsible for that life from the time of conception...well, this has very little to do with the Church as much as it has the responsibility. If God made it possible for me to conceive this child then it's for me to take care of this child, that is my belief."

Beatrice's parents, George and Elsie Graves, eventually converted to Catholicism and became members of Gesu. They were buried from Gesu.

Beatrice never shied away from the controversial topics even within her own family. When one of her sons got divorced and remarried, she tried to explain to the new spouse the challenges she may face based on her children's Catholic upbringing and faith. She told her, "...you have to understand that he was married and made a commitment to God, and that commitment is with him, and he's fighting that commitment. He feels that he broke that commitment by getting married. So you might have a little trouble with him in his

“religious aspects...” She is pleased that all of her children are still in the Catholic Church and very active in their respective parishes around the country. Beatrice remains at Gesu, “I love that church, I do. I love that school, I do.”

After her children were in high school, college, started getting married and on with their own lives, Beatrice was now free to develop parts of her own life. From 1978-1980 Beatrice was involved with another Catholic institution, Marygrove College. She was the office manager for the continuing education department working for Dr. Plophjohn. She was one of only three professional blacks employed at Marygrove at the time.

It was because of her relationships from Gesu that the other major part of Beatrice’s life came to be. Fellow parishioner, Mayor Jerry Cavanaugh ignited her interested in the political process while they both attended Gesu. After her time working at Marygrove, Beatrice gave even more of her time to politics. She held numerous jobs within the city of Detroit. In 1980 she began the summer youth job development program which she was able to do four months per year and held that position for several years. From there, she morphed into various positions: employment and training, political campaigns, having worked on every Detroit Democratic mayor’s campaign since Coleman Young through Mike Duggan.

To this day she is still involved in the political process in the city of Detroit. Beatrice started the Wayne County Democratic Black Caucus in 2008, but has been involved in the national political process since Carter/ Mondale all the way through every presidential election, including the last one.



**Beatrice working on campaigns circa 1995/1996**



**Beatrice and daughter Denege with Mayor Coleman Young, circa 1980's**

She is currently working on handing over the reins of the Black Caucus so that she becomes the chair emeritus, "I want to start giving the work on to someone else because it's a lot of work. I'm getting older and I have four vice chairs that work with me."

In her career in politics Beatrice was an officer and chair at some point of every committee that was in the Democratic Party in the 14<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. "I was executive vice chair. I was on the delegates of state central committee. I was recording secretary. I was a vice chair, I was on the executive board... I ran campaigns in terms of getting people on the street to get the vote out."

Another major influence on Beatrice and her political career was Robert "Buddy" Battle, former Director of UAW Region 1A, and the first black man to hold that position. After retirement from the UAW, Buddy became chair of the 1st Congressional District (after redistricting, it became the 14th congressional district), appointed by Mayor Coleman Young in the early 1980s. Beatrice credits Buddy with teaching her a lot about politics. After his death, she continued to work with the congressional district.





**Beatrice (first on left, in stripes) receiving an award with Robert "Buddy" Battle, from the state of Michigan.**

Beatrice says she always used her time in ways that would be helpful to people, "I'm going to tell you the reason I got that involved in politics is that we had so many people, seniors, and not only seniors, but people who came from the South. They really couldn't read and write and didn't know the voting process, and my thing was to try to educate them as much as I possibly could." Her work and care never wavered and at the end of 2022, Beatrice was awarded the Spirit of Detroit Award. It was presented to her by Coleman A. Young II, Detroit City Councilman At Large.

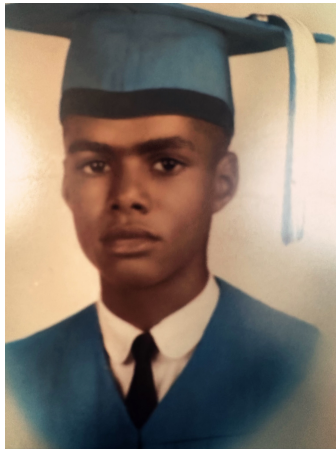


**Beatrice with Frank Woods, International Representative UAW (retired), receiving the Spirit of Detroit Award, December 5, 2022.**

Beatrice says her faith was always her guide in putting her beliefs into action. "As you know, when you start working with the public, you have a lot of things that go against you. But nothing ever got so bad that I would let it overtake me, because my faith was strong enough to take me through it." Her faith will always come out. She will pray and her faith in God takes her through everything she ever went through, and she's gone through a lot.

## The Ward children: then and now...

Ralph Ward Jr.



High school



Military



Today

Reginald Ward



7th Grade



High school



Rodney Ward



5th Grade



High school



Today

Rikki Ward



1st Grade



High school



Today

Denege Ward-Wright



4th Grade



High school



Today

# Robin Ward Jennings



7th Grade

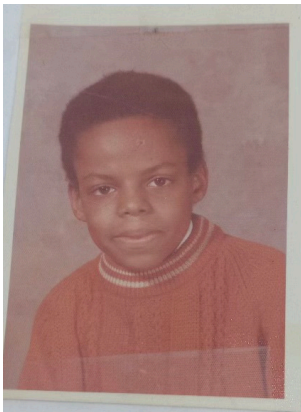


High school



Today

# Robert Ward



1st Grade



Military



Today

*Gesu Catholic Church - Detroit*



*Stories of Faith, Hope & Courage*



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## **About the creator of The Elders Project**



P.J. Edghill a.k.a Pat Jones, started telling stories at young age. As an adult with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre, that ability spread to many mediums giving her a multi media career that includes theatre, television, fiction and marketing as she learned how to tell the stories of people and brands. Within her career she has produced TV shows that have appeared on IFC, Spike TV, LOGO and Oxygen. She has worked with several Fortune 500 companies including McDonalds, General Motors, Sprint/Nextel and Reebok. Her short story *Ophelia and Crawler* was published in 2006 on AOL Black Voices and some of her plays have been produced in New York and Detroit. In 2017 Pat dropped an eight-episode fiction podcast entitled, *Ovid's Flea* based on a yet to be published novel she wrote. Pat has been an active member of GESU Parish since 1987, minus 12 years in New York.