

The Magazine of the Mizzou Alumni Association

MIZZOU

Minnie, Mizzou and Memphis

How alumna Nancy Bogatin became a civil rights pioneer.



Nancy Erdman Bogatin, front row left, was a regular commentator on the Campus Columns radio show on KFRU. Photo from the 1946 *Savitar*.

Story by Kelsey Allen

Published Feb. 23, 2015

Nancy Erdman Bogatin, BJ '46, was 13 when her mother divorced, remarried and moved the family from New York to Memphis, Tennessee. The first morning in her new home, she woke up to someone pulling on her toe.

“And there was my beloved Minnie, an African-American woman my step-father hired to work for us,” Bogatin says.

It was 1938, and Jim Crow laws were prevalent throughout the Southern states. Bogatin remembers bus rides during which Minnie would walk to the back of the bus and an indignant Bogatin would protest.

“I managed to embarrass her terribly,” she says. “The bus driver said she had to sit in the back, and I said to him, ‘How dare you!’ ”

The same thing would happen when they went to the movies. In the end, Bogatin would always sit in the back row with Minnie.

“I didn’t know how to do anything about it then,” Bogatin says, “But I took it to Missouri with me.”

Bogatin arrived at the University of Missouri in 1943. Ever since she had left New York, her goal had been to get back, so she pursued a journalism degree.

She joined one of the two Jewish sororities on

campus, Alpha Epsilon Phi (“We were told by the dean of women that we couldn’t rush any of the non-Jewish sororities,” Bogatin says.), and she helped form the Campus Columns radio show on KFRU.

When she wasn’t reporting on campus life and politics, she was making news. Bogatin was involved with a group of students who worked to integrate the university. The students traveled to Jefferson City, Missouri, to meet with students at Lincoln University to organize petitions and marches.

A couple months before graduation, the group was called into the president’s office. He made them an offer.

“We could desist or be expelled,” she recalls. “This was the first great compromise with life I made.”

Bogatin graduated in 1946. MU admitted its first African-American students in the fall of 1950.

Bogatin did accomplish her goal of getting back to New York, where she worked as a copywriter, fashion coordinator and eventually a buyer for Sears Roebuck (“I was told I could never be a buyer, but two years



After graduating from MU, Bogatin, BJ '46, worked as a copywriter and radio personality at WMPS in Memphis, Tennessee. Photo courtesy Nancy Bogatin.

later, I was a buyer,” she says).

On trips back to Memphis to visit family, her mother and friends would fix her up with local bachelors. In 1952, she married Irvin Bogatin and moved back to Memphis where, in 1956, she founded an advertising agency called the Studio of Advertising and Art.



On Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2015, the city of Memphis honored Bogatin with a Legacy Award for her work as a community activist and civil rights pioneer. Photo courtesy Nancy Bogatin.

Bogatin’s exposure to discrimination — and the adversity she faced as a businesswoman — motivated her and her husband to continue fighting for civil rights in Memphis.

In 1968, Bogatin was one of the few white women who marched in the Memphis Sanitation Strike in which more than 1,000 African-American sanitation workers walked off the job in protest of the racial discrimination and dangerous working conditions they faced.

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2015, the city of Memphis honored Bogatin with a Legacy Award for her work as a community activist and civil rights pioneer.

“What I witnessed growing up, what happened to me at Mizzou and in New York, that all made an impression on me,” Bogatin says. “You don’t forget it.

All of that led to me being involved in civil rights,
social justice and public education.”

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Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone:
573-882-5916 | Email: mizzou@missouri.edu

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