

The Magazine of the Mizzou Alumni Association

MIZZOU

Rest in Peace

Eliot Battle, a leader in integrating Columbia's schools, died June 11.



Eliot Battle was a leader in integrating Columbia's schools in the 1960s. Photo by Rachel Coward.

Story by Erik Potter

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He was known as a role model for how the city would like to behave. Eliot Battle came to Columbia in 1956 when schools and neighborhoods were still segregated. He and his late wife, Muriel, worked for years as educators to bring about racial integration and to smooth out its rough edges. Standing in testament to their efforts is the city's newest high school, Muriel Williams Battle High School.

Eliot, M Ed '60, LLD '09, died June 11 at age 88.

“He was a regular person like any of us, but he was able to calm the waters and bridge the gap between whites and blacks in our community,” Julie Middleton, BS Ed '71, EdSp '92, PhD '94, MU Extension professional and director of organizational development, said in February 2013 before a special screening of a documentary about Battle she helped create.

Battle was the first African-American to hold a staff position — guidance counselor — at Hickman High School. His was also the first African-American family in his west-side neighborhood. The decisions to accept the Hickman job and move to the white neighborhood sparked resentment from some black colleagues, who called him a traitor to his race, and anger from some white neighbors, one of whom shot and killed the family dog.

“It took more time [than I anticipated] to move through some of the problems we had,” Battle said in a February 2013 interview with MIZZOU magazine. “I would rather we would have moved more smoothly without problems arising as a result of the efforts. I learned you can’t make things go your way all the time. You have to give in and take things a bit slower. Rushing sometimes causes more problems than it helps.”

Juanamaria Cordones-Cook, a filmmaker and professor of romance languages and literatures at MU as well as a longtime friend of Battle, was also involved in making the MU Extension documentary *Battle: Change from Within*.

She said her goal with the film was to make Battle’s positive attitude and peacemaker mentality a role model for future generations.

Battle never doubted the ultimate success of his work: his students. “I felt strongly that these kids could make it in any situation if they put forth the effort to do so.”

A “Celebration of Life” service for Eliot Battle was held at 11 a.m. June 29 at Columbia’s Missouri United Methodist Church, 204 S. Ninth St. A reception will follow in the adjoining Church Life Center.

Cards can be sent to the Battle family at Eliot's home address, 2200 W. Rollins Road. The family requests no phone calls.

Editor's Note: Mizzou alumni — including Carl Kenney, BJ '86; Ben Henick, A&S '94; Charlotte Dean, BUS '82; and Mary Jo Roberts, BJ '69, and Marjorie Southard Roberts, BS Ed '54, M Ed '56, EdD '67 — share their memories of Eliot Battle in the Columbia Missourian's "From Readers" section.

Topics: Alumni, Community, History, News, Web Exclusives

Tags: Faculty, Remembering

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