

A FIRST CHURCH STORY OF QUIET POWER AND LONG-LASTING IMPACT

BY HANNA SCHOCK

**Ms. Gibson had been near me and
around me, and I did not know it!**

- Elaine Genard



Upon hearing the words above from a First Church member, I recalled Jacob's similar statement in Genesis 28:16: "God was in this place, and I did not know it."

In the June 2022 Connections newsletter, I wrote "Ethel Gibson's great influences are in life-altering positive impacts upon women at the Birmingham YW during her time and since." Years ago, I was privileged to hear such a story from Elaine Genard.

Elaine and I were in The Loft (then called New Feast) chatting after worship. Elaine is mother to my friend Angel Garrett. Delightful Elaine sang with me and a few others on the stage, offering songs

of praise to God and a longing for God's justice in our city. I asked Elaine about her history with Birmingham. I had no idea I was about to discover a remarkable connection that would have her "crying all the way home!"

Elaine gladly left Prattville, AL in 1963 at age 17 with less

than \$50. Her dream was to live in Birmingham and earn enough money to attend college.

With great admiration, Elaine spoke of Miss Gibson, Director of the YW, who bent YW rules, allowing Elaine to rent a room despite her be-

ing too young and unemployed. Unsurprisingly

to me, Elaine described Ethel Gibson as “the

first woman of power I had encountered. But

Ms. Gibson led with quiet power.” I knew “qui-

et power” to be a perfect phrase for Ethel, who

has had a lasting impact on me and my faith



Elaine's Children & Grandchildren

journey throughout my time at our church. I told Elaine her “Ms. Gibson,” had likely just

worshiped in the sanctuary next door as she had for many decades. Elaine became visibly

emotional. Here's their story:

Elaine was promised a room at the Birmingham YW after a providential meeting in Pratt-

ville with a YW Board member. Elaine would be required to find a job immediately. Once 18,

she would sign a lease for the \$10.50 weekly rent. Likely, Elaine's employment successes,

involvement at church, and the positive impression Elaine made on the woman offered the

necessary details for YW Director Gibson to invite Elaine, despite her being just 17 with no

Birmingham job. “I thought it was the coolest place,” Elaine remembered of her arrival at

the 10-storied urban building, a safe “launching pad” for young white women at that time.

Ms. Gibson gave her a warm and inspiring welcome. Knowing Elaine now, it is not surpris-

ing to me that she soon became one of “Ms. Gibson's Girls” who helped Ethel lead the YW's

weekly worship service. A few months later, young Elaine would put the YW, Ethel, and the

women it served in jeopardy.



Elaine (in red) singing at New Feast

Elaine got a job quickly and befriended two fellow employees, one black and one white. She listened intently to their conversations about her dream city. They schooled her on its racist underpinnings. Young, white, and distracted by personal issues in Prattville, Elaine was shocked to hear of such racial injustice. Further conversations, burgeoning civil rights events, and more racial injustices led Elaine to write a letter to the editor of *The Birmingham News-Post Herald* imploring citizens to listen to each other and find peaceful solutions. Elaine listed the YW's address as her own. Her letter and address were published in the newspaper.

The many angry responses to Elaine's letter included mounds of hate mail and a bomb threat. Elaine was away when the letter was published. Upon her return, she was told to report to Ms. Gibson's office immediately. Puzzled Elaine became anxious when she saw piles of mail addressed to her. Ms. Gibson gently explained what had happened. She helped Elaine re-



alize the carelessness of her actions and how she had put everyone in the building at risk. But "Ms. Gibson did not throw me out. She was too much of a lady for that." Instead, she affirmed Elaine's growing awareness of racial disparity, conviction in her opinions, and desires for racial justice. The two women agreed: If Elaine continued to write publicly, she would not list the YW as her address.

Elaine stayed at the YW only a few more months. Excited about a job opportunity in Huntsville, she shared her exit plans with Ethel. Ethel counseled Elaine on those plans, seeming concerned and surprisingly sad. Ms. Gibson was wary of the move because Elaine had not informed her mother. I suspect Ethel was also worried for this naïve young woman to leave the YW's protection and sad for the end of Elaine's exuberant presence at the YW and the lessons the city was teaching her. Ethel could not keep Elaine in Birmingham. The two women held hands and prayed for Elaine's future. Then Ms. Gibson urged Elaine to be careful and "call if you need me."



For this article, I asked Elaine if she met Ethel again. Elaine explained that she was "truly amazed to find out that we were church members together. She was such a big influence on my life and, no doubt, to countless other young women." Elaine explained that a few Sundays after our conversation, she "chased her down. It had been 50 years!" Elaine saw Ethel in our Welcome Center. She approached with trepidation but also gratitude for another opportunity to be in Ms. Gibson's presence. Elaine was greeted with "that same warm smile." Elaine introduced herself and offered an emotional thank you. Elaine was not sure she was remembered, but that didn't matter. "There were so many Ms. Gibson's girls! Everybody loved Ms. Gibson!" Elaine left the brief encounter having met again one of her heroes – an inspiring woman whose willingness to bend rules, hospitality, gentle forgiveness, and wise advice opened a wide door to Elaine's future. Elaine still wonders, "How would my life have been if God had not put me in this great woman's path?"