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An Unforgettable Woman

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The *Reader's Digest* used to run a monthly feature titled "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Ever Met." When I think of that title, I think of Mary Eunice Oliver. A tiny laywoman from San Diego, she loved big hats, screamed her greetings across convention halls, and always managed to disturb the faithful with her unrelenting stand on human rights. She loved to claim fame as the last duly elected Deputy to General Convention denied a seat (in 1969) because she was a woman.

No one who saw her banners unfurled ever forgot the experience. Laity, priests, and bishops of this church, even Archbishops of Canterbury, experienced her eloquent challenges to the status quo. Mary Eunice died a year ago. She was 85 years old. Here are two of my favorite memories of her.



At the height of the Civil Rights struggle, Mary Eunice and I flew to Jackson, Mississippi to attend a meeting of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU). Mary Eunice was a member of the national board. I was chair of the San Diego Chapter.

At this time of heightened racial tension in the South, we were to be part of the first integrated group ever to stay at the Heidelberg Hotel in downtown Jackson. Having read James Silver's book, *Mississippi: The Closed Society*, I was aware that we faced difficulties. The reality was worse than anything I had imagined.

As our cab left the airport, we saw Confederate flags everywhere. Trucks passed with loaded gun racks. A gas station displayed a banner that read, "Have you shot your (n word) today?"

The driver was threading his way through heavy traffic when Mary Eunice called out from the back seat, "I'll bet you can't guess why we've come to Jackson!" I couldn't believe my ears. What was she thinking? Crazy thoughts raced through my head: Would we be driven somewhere and shot? Would the Klan get us? Could we escape by jumping from the moving car?

As Mary Eunice began telling the driver about Episcopalians from all over the country planning to integrate the Heidelberg Hotel, St Andrew's Church, and various means of public transportation in Jackson, I held my breath. How would he react?

Our driver's response took us by surprise. He told us that he was part of the "Old South," but he had a child who would grow up in the "New South." He had been talking with his wife about their need to move to another part of the city where their son would attend an integrated school.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Warming to his story, the driver went on to say that, as an older father, he was looking forward to retirement in the not-too-distant future. It would be a time to hunt and fish and take life easy.

"Resting is for heaven!" Mary Eunice cried. "While we are here we have work to do. With your interest in the outdoors, you would make a great scoutmaster. My husband is a scoutmaster

and loves it. Or you could be a Big Brother to some child who doesn't have a father. There are so many ways for you to have a real *ministry* during your retirement years."

The man said he had worked hard all his life; he had earned the right to do nothing if it suited him. She would hear none of it. She challenged him to rethink his plans and use the gifts God had given him in service to others.

When—finally—we arrived at the hotel, the cabby turned to look at Mary Eunice. A wide smile lit his face. "Lady," he said, "you're some ride!"



Three young men were arrested in San Diego on minor charges. Two of the boys' fathers were lawyers in Washington, D.C. They arranged for the boys to be released but had no one to pick them up at the jail. They called Bishop Ed Crowther in Santa Barbara and asked him if he could recommend someone. Ed told them "If it's San Diego, you need to call Mary Eunice Oliver," and gave them her number.

The boys were hippies, determined to be part of a "new world." Mary Eunice drove them from jail to her home in Pacific Beach. She gave them a room she called "Little Siberia," because it was at the other end of the house from her bedroom. "Little Siberia" was equipped with a single bed. Two of the boys would have to sleep on the floor.

At breakfast the next morning, Mary Eunice asked which one had slept in the bed. The boys told her. "Why him?" she asked. They said he was the one with the credit cards. "That doesn't sound like a *new world* to me!" was her reply.

Sometime later, Mary Eunice went to Washington to participate in a demonstration against the war in Vietnam. It was sponsored by Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam and was held in the Capitol Rotunda. Some of the best-known leaders of the anti-war movement were there: Dr. Benjamin Spock, William Sloane Coffin, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and many others.

When invited to speak, Mary Eunice stole the show. Admitting that she had encouraged her boys to hide from the Draft, she said, "I expect to be exonerated one day like the mother of Moses who hid her son in the bulrushes and Mary who hid her son in Egypt!"

The group was arrested. Mary Eunice spent the night in a cramped holding cell. Next morning, the group appeared in court. Mary Eunice saw two well-dressed men sitting in the courtroom. Although she had never seen them before, they looked familiar. They were the fathers of two of the boys she had picked up at the San Diego jail. They had come to see that everything went smoothly for her, and to help if needed.

When Mary Eunice told this story, she said those two men were like the angel of the Lord who opened the prison doors and freed the apostles. (Acts 5:19)

After paying a twenty-five-dollar fine and thanking the boys' fathers, she flew back to San Diego to continue the struggle.



Fred Fenton lives in Concord, California with his wife, Billie. Fred is a member of the Gift Planning Department of the Diocese of California and works as a stewardship consultant and supply priest. The Fentons enjoy spending time with their three granddaughters.