

The adventures of Evelyn Cunningham

By **TANANGACHI MFUNI**
Amsterdam News Staff

Sitting in the lamp lit living room of her Riverside Drive apartment, Evelyn Cunningham is a vision of pink.

But don't take her for a pushover. The 90 year-old

with a gun and [would] talk all day long about niggers, loudly," she remembers.

On one of these occasions, with a crowd looking on, Cunningham walked



EVELYN CUNNINGHAM

Black New Yorkers

veteran journalist — once Governor Rockefeller's right arm on women's issues, advisor to President Nixon, and a die hard Republican — remembers when she became a feminist at age six.

Cunningham, a North Carolina native, grew up near the beaches of Elizabeth City, not far from where the Wright brothers took flight.

"Everybody in Elizabeth City went down to the beach to watch the Wright brothers build this funny thing, we didn't call them airplanes back then," she recalls.

One day as Cunningham, her dad, and her brother watched the spectacle, her mom came out and asked her to return home with her to bake cookies.

"My father jumped up. He got so angry and he yelled at my mother, 'Maime! Stop with the cookies. She don't need to know how to make cookies. My Evelyn just might want to fly a plane!'" Cunningham laughs recalling her first "moment of feminism."

"The story would have been perfect had I been a pilot," she says. But the wry-humored senior knew even as a child she wanted to write. Perhaps she got it from her grandmother, a relative of 1930's North Carolina Governor John Blucher Ehringhaus, and a social writer for Elizabeth City's Daily Advance.

However, when Cunningham wrote for the Pittsburgh Courier's New York City bureau, the last thing the thirty-something wanted to do was social or "women's issues reporting."

"I fought so hard to do hard news," she says. "They [the editors] said finally 'What do you want to do?' I said 'I want to do the hard news. I want to do the killings, the lynchings, the Martin Luther Kings.'"

Cunningham was assigned to cover the Civil Rights movement in Birmingham, where she was curiously received as a Black, female reporter. While in Alabama, Cunningham didn't shy away from controversy, once even publicly seeking an interview with infamous segregationist Eugene "Bull" Connor.

"He stood in the middle of what would be Main Street

up to Conner and bluntly asked for an interview.

"He said, 'Get the hell out of here!' He was amused by the fact that I was a female reporter. [I think] he wanted to ask me questions, but he didn't," she said.

Reflecting on what could have come out of the interview had it taken place, she notes, "I didn't care what he said. I'd have liked to have heard it and recorded it."

As fraught with tension as that confrontation was, Cunningham found herself in worse fixes, like the time when she journeyed with

Percy Sutton and six members of the NAACP to desegregate a rural Maryland diner.

Gangs of police met them there, she says. While policemen hauled off the men, Cunningham, the sole female in the group, was detained at the diner.

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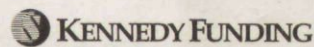
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"The law said if a woman is arrested she must be arrested by another women," recalled Cunningham, who waited with the hateful officers, for a female police officer to arrive from the precinct to arrest her.

"They called me the worst, dirty names I've ever heard. I can't even repeat most of them. I was scared to death," said Cunningham, who remembers the cops spitting on her while hurling insults.

"Never before or since have I been that frightened," she said. "Even now I think about that possibility, all by myself and all those men taking turns raping me. For-

tunately, that did not happen."

Now in her later years, Cunningham considers her reporting from the battlefield of the Civil Rights movement, the most crucial writing she's done.

Though Cunningham is currently recuperating from the effects of receiving treatment for a cancer she never had, she remains in good spirits.

"I get out. I'm out everyday," says Cunningham, who finds the most enjoyment spending time with family and friends.

"I'm increasingly spending time with old friends," she says. The other day, when she fell face down on some ice and had to go to the hospital, her friends rushed to meet her there.

"I'm rich in friends and we have deep love for each other," she says gratefully.

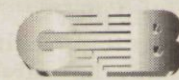


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