Anna Eleanor Roosevelt

by Ruth Mosely

My grandmother, Catherine Jackson has always spoken to me about the concerns, compassion and the achievements of the dynamic First Lady, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt. A shy and awkward child she grew into a woman with great sensitivity to the underprivileged of all creeds, races, and nations. Her constant work and effort to make improvements in society made her one of the most loved women of her generation.

On October 11, 1884, Eleanor was born in New York City, daughter of Anna Hall and Elliot Roosevelt, brother of Theodore Roosevelt who was the President of the United States. Her mother died in 1892 and two years later her adored father died also. Eleanor went to live with Grandmother Hall and attended a distinguished school in England that gave her, at 15, her first chance to develop self-confidence among other girls.

After graduating from college she returned for a debut that she dreaded because of her shyness. In her circle of friends was a fourth cousin, young handsome Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They became engaged in 1903 and were married in 1905. Eleanor bore six children in eleven years; one son died in infancy. In her autobiography she stated, "I suppose I was fitting pretty well into the pattern of a fairly conventional, quiet, young society matron." Mrs. Roosevelt became everything but that.

Her husband Franklin served in the state Senate from 1910 to 1913. It was at this time that Eleanor became his political helpmate. Learning all she could about Washington and its ways while he served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. In 1921 Franklin was stricken with poliomyelitis. Eleanor lovingly tended to his every need. She became his eyes and ears for him, a trusted and tireless reporter. She became active in the women's division of the State Democratic Committee and familiarized herself with social conditions better than any of her predecessors upon entering the White House as First Lady in 1933.

Among her achievements as First Lady was the establishment of the National Youth Administration. She also revitalized Ellen Wilson's slum clearance program with the Alley Dwelling Act of 1934. She invited Marian Anderson, a black contralto, to sing at the White House in 1936. Later, when the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let Miss Anderson sing at Constitution Hall, Eleanor Roosevelt promptly resigned from the organization and arranged for the singer to perform at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939.

During the Second World War, she visited army bases all over the world. One of the bases was the Tuskegee Army Air Field in 1941. At the time a group of black pilots, known as the Tuskegee Airmen, had completed training but were not allowed to participant in warfare due to racial discrimination. When the first Lady visited Tuskegee Army Airfield, she insisted on taking a ride in an airplane driven by a black pilot--Chief Anderson. Eleanor convinced the President to activate the participation of these airmen, who became internationally famous because they never lost an airplane on the way to safety zones.

President Franklin Roosevelt died in April of 1945; however, Eleanor continued to remain active as a delegate to the United Nations where she became chairman of the Human Rights Commission. She turned down many opportunies to run for political office, preferring to remain free to express her opinions as she saw fit. Eleanor was a faithful and trusted crusader for many causes, of which are too numerous to mention in this essay. Upon her death in 1962, Winston Churchill said, “she left golden footprints behind.”