

Innovative Iowans: Edna Griffin

Activity Overview: From letter writing to protests, there are many ways for Iowans to connect and express their feelings with their legislators. This Innovative Iowan activity focuses on the important work of Iowan Edna Griffin and how she inspired change through her landmark court case against Katz Drug Store. After learning about Griffin's work, try your hand at writing a letter to inspire change.

Connection to Iowa History

Edna Griffin was born on October 23, 1909 in Lexington, Kentucky. After graduating from Fisk University in 1933, she and her husband moved to Des Moines in 1947. On July 7, 1948, Edna with two friends and her daughter, stopped for ice cream at Katz Drug Store located in downtown Des Moines. The group was denied service because the store was "not equipped to serve colored people." Griffin organized sit-ins, boycotts and picket lines outside of the drug store every Saturday for two months. After filing a lawsuit against the store, Katz was found guilty and Griffin was awarded \$1 in her civil case. Due to her case, it became illegal to deny service based on race in Iowa.



Griffin founded the Des Moines chapter of the Congress for Racial Equality, a civil rights group focused on non-violent protests such as the Montgomery bus boycott, desegregating Chicago Public Schools and helping with the Freedom Riders. She and her husband also financed and organized to send 40 Iowans to attend the March on Washington in 1963. Edna Griffin died on February 8, 2000 and the former Katz Drug Store building in Des Moines has been renamed in her honor.

Instructions [\(Video Instructions Available\)](#)

- 1 Identify the Issue.** Think about what issue you would like to contact your representative to express your views. The topic can be small like a local issue or large like an upcoming bill vote.
- 2 Find.** Head online to find the contact information for your representative. Each representative should have a phone number, mailing address and email.
- 3 Write.** Using the provided outline, write your letter. Remember to keep it brief and personal. How does this issue affect you and how would you like to see it changed?
- 4 Edit.** After writing the letter, make sure to review for edits. It always helps to have a second pair of eyes to review the document for any errors.
- 5 Send.** Following edits, prepare the letter to be sent either electronically or in the mail. If sending through the mail, make sure to include a return address and stamp.
- 6 Share!** After you complete your letter, share it with the State Historical Museum of Iowa. Email a photo to museum.education@iowa.gov. We want to share your letter with others!

Materials

- Pen/Pencil
- Letter Outline

Instructions continued on next page

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Instructions continued

7 Questions to Spark Learning

- Do you think it is important to reach out to representatives? Why or why not?
- What are other ways, besides letter writing, you can influence change?
- In what ways did Edna Griffin inspire change in her local community?

8 Additional Resources

If your young historian would like to learn more about this topic, explore these additional resources below.

- [Edna Griffin Biography](#) - Iowa Department of Human Rights
- [Edna Griffin, Civil Rights Advocate](#) - University Libraries, University of Iowa
- [Everyone is Served: Celebrate New Life for the Edna Griffin Building](#) - Iowa Architectural Foundation
- [Contact Us](#) - Congress.gov
- [Writing Your Elected Representative](#) - American Civil Liberties Union
- [How to Write a Letter to Your Legislator](#) - Constitutional Rights Foundation
- [The Harkin Institute Resources](#)

Letter Outline

Your Name
Your Address

Date

Name of Government Official
Official's Title
Section of Government
Mailing Address

Dear _____:

First Paragraph

Introduce yourself and explain your concern.

Second Paragraph

Why does your concern matter? How might this affect yourself and the community?

Third Paragraph

Conclusion. Restate your concern. Let the reader know you expect a response and how to respond.

Sincerely,
Sign your name in pen here

Print Your Name