

## ANNE BRADEN Obituary

Revered white anti-racist southern activist Anne Braden died at the age of 81 on Monday morning, March 6, 2006 at Jewish Hospital in Louisville, ending nearly 60 years of unyielding action against segregation, racism, and white supremacy. Braden was hospitalized on Saturday, March 4, and had been treated for pneumonia and dehydration.

Braden catapulted into national headlines in mid-1954 when she and her husband Carl Braden were indicted for sedition for their leadership in desegregating a Louisville, Kentucky, suburb. Their purchase of a house in an all-white neighborhood on behalf of African Americans Andrew and Charlotte Wade violated Louisville's color line and provoked violence against both families, culminating with the dynamiting of the house in June of 1954. A subsequent grand jury investigation concentrated not on the neighborhood's harassment of the Wades, but looked to the Bradens' supposedly communistic intentions in backing the purchase, and they were indicted for sedition that fall. The couple's sedition case made national news and earned them the ire of segregationists across the South, which was reeling from the U.S. Supreme Court's condemnation of school segregation in its Brown ruling earlier that spring. Only Carl was convicted, and that conviction was later overturned. The sedition charges left the Bradens pariahs, branded as radicals and "reds" in the Cold-War South, and they became fierce civil libertarians who openly espoused left-wing social critiques but would never either embrace nor disavow the Communist Party publicly because they felt that to do so accepted the terms of the 1950s anticommunist "witch hunts."

Anne Braden's memoir of the case, *The Wall Between*, was published in 1958, becoming one of the few accounts of its era to probe the psychology of white southern racism from within. Their case also introduced the Bradens to the civil rights movement blossoming farther south, in which white allies were few and far between. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., meeting Anne Braden in 1957, pronounced her "the most amazing white woman" in her unswerving dedication to civil rights. The Bradens soon joined the staff of a regional civil rights organization, the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), and began traveling the region to solicit greater white support for the movement. As the 1960s dawned, Anne Braden became a mentor and role model to younger southern students who joined the movement, a role she maintained for the rest of her life. Although she was suspect in some circles, Braden publicized and supported the student sit-ins in the pages of SCEF's *Southern Patriot* newspaper, which she edited, and she encouraged a broader vision of social change that would include peace and economic justice. She was also instrumental in Louisville's Open Housing movement in the later 1960s, and among the leading white voices who helped to bring peace to the turbulent second generation of school

desegregation, in which busing brought open violence to Louisville and other cities in the mid-1970s.

After Carl Braden's untimely death in 1975, Anne Braden remained a central proponent of racial justice in Louisville and across the South, eventually evolving from pariah to heroine. Braden's primary message was the centrality of racism in the U.S. social fabric, but she constantly stressed that civil rights activism was as much whites' responsibility as it was that of people of color. "Hers has been among the most forceful and persistent of white voices for racial equality in modern U.S. history," according to her biographer, Catherine Fosl, author of *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (2002).

In speeches delivered in the nearly six decades of her activism, Braden would frequently reflect on her odyssey from segregationist youth to anti-racist advocate: a process she called "turning myself inside out." Reared in a middle-class, pro-segregation family, Braden changed as a young reporter covering the emerging civil rights movement in 1947 Alabama, where she had observed two separate and unequal systems of justice meted out in the Birmingham courthouse. She subsequently left the supposed neutrality of mainstream journalism to apply her considerable journalistic talents to the aid of African Americans in their quest to end segregation. Her efforts against southern racism, her friend and fellow activist Angela Davis reflected, "enabled vast and often spectacular social changes. . . that most of her contemporaries during the 1950s would never have been able to imagine."

Decades later, Braden was still working against racism and for justice and peace. In the fall of 2005, she joined other Louisville activists on buses bound for the anti-Iraq War demonstration in Washington D.C. even though she went in a wheelchair. She was a frequent voice in the Rainbow Coalition nationally and a co-founder of the Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, as well as being active in local issues including police brutality, housing-not-bombs, environmental racism, civil liberties, and lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender and other human rights. In the 1990s, she became the recipient of many awards, including the first ever Roger Baldwin Medal of Liberty, bestowed on her by the American Civil Liberties Union in 1991. She also became a teacher, offering social justice history courses at the University of Louisville and Northern Kentucky University. Braden was still teaching at the time of her death and was still fired by the passion for justice that had guided her adult life. She had completed a proposal for a local activist summer camp only the day before her hospitalization.

*Source: Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression and Carl Braden Memorial Center*