



## Nellie Cuellar

(1899 - 1987)

*Inducted:* **2003**

*Era:* **Historical**

*Locale:* **Detroit**

*Group:* **African American**

*Area(s) of Achievement:* **Civil Rights**

Nellie Cuellar devoted her entire life to helping others and creating social justice. She learned to help people at an early age when her mother and then her father died leaving Nellie to raise her three younger siblings. She was only able to acquire a third grade education, but Mrs. Cuellar proved that life's lessons made excellent teachers.

Cuellar's political activist career began in 1918 when at the age of 19 she organized a protest in her home town against the murder of three black share-croppers burned in their cotton shed by the local sheriff. Her activism continued when she organized the first block club in her Southside Chicago neighborhood and created political education seminars to teach people how to lobby for their concerns at all political levels.

In the 1930s Nellie married Joe Cuellar, moved to Big Rapids, Michigan, and raised three children. They were the only interracial family in the area. Cuellar continued her community involvement in her new home. She was an assistant Girl Scout Leader, active in the Farm Bureau and the PTA, set up a soup kitchen for workers striking at Republic Steel Company, and, maintaining her Chicago ties, worked with John L. Lewis to organize black workers in Chicago and later in coal strikes in Michigan and Virginia. During this time she also organized two busloads of people to travel to Washington, DC to demonstrate in the World War I Veterans' Bonus March.

In 1939 Cuellar's husband tragically died leaving her alone to raise their three children. She did this and continued to work to improve the lives of others. In the 1940s the NAACP asked Nellie Cuellar to investigate and report discrimination against blacks and Puerto Ricans in both union and management practices in the garment industry of New York. She later became the Chair of Project Commitment, an organization to promote interracial understanding throughout Michigan. She remained active in this organization for 12 years.

As national attention was drawn to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, Nellie Cuellar was still a prominent and hardworking member of the cause. She marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Birmingham and from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. After moving to southwest Detroit, Cuellar served for eight years as the President of the southwest Deacon Street Block Club, and was Co-Chair of the southwest Detroit United Citizens for 11 years.

Nellie Cuellar showed how one woman can make the difference in the lives of many. She dedicated herself to worthy causes, and, in the process, instilled her sense of commitment, devotion, and idealism in those around her.