

## Eleanor Roosevelt A Kindred Spirit<sup>i</sup>

Eleanor Roosevelt was the first recipient of Pauli's activism. Pauli's confrontations by typewriter often included the first lady. Her undisguised target was President Roosevelt. Why not go to the top? But Pauli also knew that the chance of Franklin Roosevelt reading one of her letters were slim, where if she wrote the First Lady, her view might have a chance to be passed on to the President. She was right. Eleanor had been an activist on her own even before she married Franklin Roosevelt. After she came back from school in England, at age 17, Eleanor didn't do what most girls of her social standing were supposed to do. She didn't go to balls, or lounge in sailboats. Instead, she volunteered teaching immigrant women and women who worked in clothing factories. She learned about the terrible conditions of poor women's lives. When she met Franklin, Eleanor introduced him to the dreadful lives of immigrants and the poor. Throughout her life, Eleanor Roosevelt nudged Franklin to pass laws to help the plight of women and the poor. It wasn't a stretch at all for Eleanor to listen to Pauli. They were kindred spirits. It is a testament to both Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt that the two became friends. The two women had first met in person when Pauli organized National Sharecroppers Week in 1940. The First Lady invited Pauli and the head of the committee to the White House, donated \$100 and agreed to speak at the function. Their next encounter was a "confrontation by typewriter" when Eleanor Roosevelt crossed the picket line at Washington's Keith Theater. *Abraham Lincoln in Illinois* was playing in a benefit for the Children's Hospital. Not only were Blacks banned from watching the movie about their hero, but a contest for an Abe Lincoln lookalike was won by a Black. A very light-skinned Black. Once the organizers of the contest realized this, they canceled the award ceremony. Eleanor Roosevelt should not have crossed the picket lines. Not in Pauli's mind. Mrs. Roosevelt said she understood how the picketers felt, but the organizers of a charity event had the right to invite whoever they wanted. The two women disagreed, but they understood each other. Pauli spoke, Eleanor listened. Mrs. Roosevelt publicized Pauli's views in her newspaper column, "My Day."

When Pauli Murray railed against President Roosevelt, for not taking action against lynchings and racism at home, the First Lady said, "Come to tea." Pauli had gone as far as to say that she wished she had voted for someone else, Eleanor Roosevelt met Pauli at the door, gave her a warm hug, poured their tea, and listened. Pauli had been ruthless about the President. Eleanor won her over. Pauli couldn't stay mad.<sup>ii</sup> During their relationship, Pauli brought the First Lady first-hand knowledge of the inhumanities, humiliations, and unfairness suffered by Blacks. Mrs. Roosevelt listened. Being the eyes, ears, and legs of the disabled President, Eleanor brought Pauli's complaints to him. As she had taught him about the plight of working women and women in settlement houses when they were courting, Eleanor now brought Pauli's insights to Franklin. Sometimes the President was able to do something. Sometimes, Eleanor Roosevelt caused government policy to change on her own. Sometimes, like when the President responded merely with regret, the only thing Eleanor could say was "I understand." Both the President and Mrs. Roosevelt were Pauli's champions. They wrote on her behalf when she fought for admission to Harvard Law School. Eleanor Roosevelt hosted Pauli at the White House, at her apartment in New York, and at Val Kil, her home in Hyde Park. She hosted Pauli, as well as Pauli's aunts, and nieces. Sometimes the First Lady invited Pauli to dinners with dignitaries from other countries. The dignitary's response to this outstanding woman of color, spoke volumes to Eleanor.<sup>iii</sup> Once, when Pauli was in a New York hospital recovering from appendicitis, Eleanor Roosevelt put the hospital in an uproar by visiting the young Black woman.

Throughout her life, Pauli never stopped educating Eleanor about the plight of the Negro race, and the First Lady always listened to the woman she called her “firebrand.” Even though Pauli often quarreled with the President’s inability to do all she wanted done, she felt his death deeply and she memorialized him in a poem.<sup>iv</sup> <sup>v</sup>Eleanor’s death was, to Pauli, a very difficult blow to bear. To Pauli, Eleanor Roosevelt had been a sister at arms, a confidant, a cheerleader, a mother and an aunt all rolled into one.

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<sup>i</sup> There is a book called *The Firebrand and the First Lady*. Eleanor Roosevelt called Pauli Murray a Firebrand.

<sup>ii</sup> “I cannot tell you how much personal reassurance I found in the interview yesterday. There is no need for any apology to our generation. I only hope we can keep alive the flame of human compassion and freedom as you are doing.” Murray, Pauli. *Autobiography*. P. 193

<sup>iii</sup> Murray, Pauli. *Autobiography*. P. 290-291

<sup>iv</sup> There are many pictures of Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt in both Pauli’s autobiography and in *The Firebrand and the First Lady* by Patricia Bell-Scott

<sup>v</sup> Poem “The Passing of F.D.R.” *Dark Testament and Other Poems, II*