

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

Rosella Porterfield Honored

from

**The Northern Kentucky African American
Heritage Task Force Newsletter**

Fall, 2002

www.nkyviews.com

ROSELLA PORTERFIELD HONORED

A bronze plaque depicting **Rosella Porterfield**, 83, former librarian and teacher, was unveiled at the Rosella French Porterfield Park in Elsmere recently. The Elsmere Park Board wanted to honor the retired educator who pushed for integration of the Erlanger-Elsmere schools in 1955. The plaque depicts Porterfield



in her 40's, holding the hand of **Debbie Onkst**, a white student who modeled her own career as school librarian on Porterfield's example, and Elsmere Mayor **Billy Bradford**, the first African American mayor in Northern Kentucky.

Porterfield, a Daviess County native, obtained bachelor's and master's degrees at a time when few African American females were able to do so. She began her teaching career at Barnes Temple Church in Elsmere. Through her efforts, the students were provided with more of needed school supplies already being given to students in the white schools.

In 1947, she taught and became principal of Wilkens Heights School in Elsmere, a school serving the African American community. In 1955, she approached Superintendent Edgar Amett saying it was time to integrate. *Life* magazine, on September 17, 1956, reported the feat was accomplished without agitation. The smooth, peaceful process was very unusual at the time and much of the credit goes to Porterfield.

With integration, Porterfield realized a life-long ambition, becoming a librarian for the Erlanger-Elsmere School District. It required her to return to school for additional certification which she obtained through long trips several times a week to the University of Kentucky. She remained in the librarian position until her retirement in 1980.

Speakers at the dedication—city officials, former students, fellow teachers, friends—spoke of her intelligence, determination, grace, compassion, dignity and inspiration. Fledgling teachers went to her for guidance and instruction, students learned to love reading from being read to, others were inspired to enter the teaching field.

Porterfield has been a pillar of strength in her church, Zion Baptist in Walton. She has played piano there for many years and held various offices in the church.

Currently, she is mentoring a young woman who will replace her as church pianist. Despite physical limitations, she attends church regularly, visits the sick, and speaks to groups such as the Boone County Retired Teachers when invited.

Representatives of the Elsmere Park Board recognized Porterfield's commitment to her community. They hope the park, located in Elsmere on Capitol Street and named in her honor, will be an inspiration to the future generations of children who will use and enjoy it.