



## Mrs. Esther Willis

June 15, 1940 - April 27, 2017

Esther Lee Willis, daughter of the late Gayron and Marie Forts was born on June 15, 1940 Inman, GA in Fayette County. The family later moved to Hapeville, GA where she attended public school. She was the youngest of three siblings. The Forts family was Baptist for years; but, joined the Church of God In Christ shortly before relocating to Detroit, MI.

Esther started working at an early age. She began helping her grandmother (Ether) with the crops in the summer time, babysitting the neighborhood kids and any odd and end jobs she could find. After working in the hospitality industry, Esther quickly found more opportunity in the Dry Cleaning business.

She was united in holy matrimony to the famous Blues singer, the late Robert Lee (Chick) Willis, aka "The Stoop Down Man". After three years of marriage the couple was blessed with their daughter Metsa.

### A Political Fight for Women Rights 1962

Esther worked at One Hour Martinizing Dry Cleaners in Atlanta, GA. The owner of the dry cleaners had nine stores with a predominately female workforce. When she applied for her maternity leave pay the request was denied, even though her white female co-workers received maternity pay.

Upon learning there were other African American female employees who were

being denied maternity pay, Esther united all the women together and sought legal recourse through several grassroots organization such as the NAACP and SCLC but to no avail. The group of women approached The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The organization said yes to the charge of representing the women in their fight for justice.

At first the owner refused their demands which led the women to organize a boycott. Esther and the other women placed picket lines in front of all nine stores which resulted in all of the stores closing. The owner, after having a heart attack from all the stress, lost so much money he finally agreed to give all of his African American female employees' maternity pay. Esther received several death threats during the protests but she never wavered.

Esther retired from Denny's as a culinary professional and trainer. In her mature years, Esther joined the Church of Latter Day Saints, Palmer Park Ward in Detroit, MI and was a faithful member for nearly 20 years. She joined the Twin Oaks Ward, Atlanta Georgia Stake in 2012 when she returned to her home state to reside with Metsa and her grandson Dontae Mitchell.

Esther loved Coca-Cola! Her love for the beverage ran deeper than her passion for the fizz at the end of a swig. In her mind, every time she purchased a Coca-Cola it was a statement of freedom and equality. One day after young Esther and her siblings received money for working on their grandmother's land they headed down to the country store.

At the store her siblings saw her crying and she explained the owner said "I can't buy a Coke, because he don't sell niggas Coke". When they told Grandma Ether, she took them back to the store and confronted the owner. "I don't want no trouble Ether", he said, she stated "I don't want no trouble either", she stated. "My grandchild just wants to buy a Coke". The shop owner told Esther to go get her a Coca-Cola and they headed back to the farm.

Esther's beautiful life will forever be cherished in the life of her daughter: Metsa Mitchell of Atlanta, GA, brother, Bobby (Michelle) Forts of Ypsilanti, MI; grandchildren, Donald Mitchell Detroit, MI, Dontae Mitchell Atlanta, GA; Aunt, Mrs. Grace Cooper of Atlanta, GA; great-grandchildren, DaJharae Mitchell, DeAja Mitchell, DeJai Mitchell (all of Detroit, MI), and a host of nieces, nephews, cousins and friends.

Funeral Saturday, May 6, 2017, 11am at Gregory B. Levett & Sons Funeral Home, 4347 Flat Shoals Pkwy, Decatur, GA., 30034. Visitation Friday, May 5, 2017 10AM-8PM with family hour 6pm-8pm. Burial at Kennedy Memorial Gardens

# Tribute Wall

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“ I was welcomed by this beautiful person while she was about to step on the trip bus at this community recreational place in Kirkwood. She was as joyous as she looks in this picture wanting to know my name and gladly gave me hers. There wasn't anything old about her who always looked well kept, presentable, stylish and none like no other wearing her green eye shadow each day. Her aura was bright and she had no problem letting her little light shine. On another day while going outside she would touch my shoulder as if letting me know she had my back. On another occasion, realizing what she was going to do going again in that direction, she dropped her lighter. I said, meaning only good, that it might have been a sign for her to quit smoking. She froze in her step and gave me this look telling me she had something to tell me when she got back. I ran like a chicken and headed on out early that day! You could tell by her demeanor that she didn't play and was nobody's fool. Later on that week, I snuck up behind her sitting in her same chair and gave her a hug and a kiss which she appreciated and reciprocated. I mentioned to her that I couldn't get close to her after smoking because I had been diagnosed with second hand smoke syndrome as a result of my mom smoking a lot growing up. She understood and said that's alright baby. I tried to include her in on the excitement of a game of dominoes I was learning how to play by getting her to keep score. She was happy to be of service until that nap came down on her and you best leave well enough alone. The sad news of her fall was announced at the center and I prayed that she would recover with my heart going out to her only daughter. We were on first name basis, which I do believe that people enjoy being recognized as themselves and not just for their age as if we are when you address a good friend. I got there just in time for the funeral but missed viewing her body. It was probably for the best wanting to remember her the spry hip chick that I got to meet and was greeted by in the short time period of a month. I was thankful to hear more about her and receive a program where I found out that we had more alike being somewhat of a rebel of my own. Even her birthday was close to my mom's. I wanted to say a few words to let others know what she meant to me but hopefully this message will

*get out to others. It was like a re-visitation of another seasoned friend who was full of life and I think shared the same birthday what sent me through a down period after losing her the first of the year. God has his girl back in glory to praise all day and night long!*

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**Virginia Ansley** - May 07, 2017 at 02:49 PM