



BIOGRAPHY

A DOCUMENTED ORIGINAL TUSKEGEE AIRMAN

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E. BERNICE “BUNNY” GAUSE DOWNING

As a civilian who served at Tuskegee Army Airfield in the 1940s, E. Bernice “Bunny” Gause Downing was among the women who earned the distinction of documented “Original Tuskegee Airman.”

E. Bernice “Bunny” Gause was born to George and Marie Gause in 1918 in Wilmington, North Carolina. In addition to working as an Architect, her father owned Gause Funeral Home and a grocery store. The family moved to Bartow, Florida, in 1929. Bunny attended the historic Union Academy, graduating at the age of 16. Three years later, she graduated from Florida A&M College (now University) – where she met Alvin Downing, her future husband – with a degree in English and Business. In 1938, Bunny returned to Bartow to teach at her alma mater, Union Academy.

In 1940, Bunny took a position as the accountant at Jordan Park Housing Authority in St. Petersburg, Florida; Alvin had moved there the previous year to begin a teaching career. Bunny lived with her aunt and uncle, Edward and Mae McRae, owners of McRae Funeral Home.

After he was drafted into the Army Air Corps in 1942, Alvin was assigned to Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama. Upon completing his training and receiving his commission in 1944, Al asked Bunny to pin his Second Lieutenant Bar on him. Later that same year, Bunny Gause and Alvin were married.



Back in Tuskegee, Al was made Adjutant of the 613th Army Air Force Band. Meanwhile, Bunny worked at Tuskegee Institute before becoming the Assistant to the Chief of Cost Accounting, providing support for the entire base as a civilian employee. The Tuskegee Army Airfield was reorganized in 1944, and two years later the Downings relocated to Lockbourne Air Base in Columbus, Ohio the new home to the Tuskegee Airmen.

During the Downing family’s time in Columbus, Bunny gave birth to two daughters, Dierdre in 1948 and Evelyn in 1950. Following his assignment at Lockbourne, Captain Downing and his family did two tours in Japan, punctuated by a stint in Washington, D.C., where daughter Alvinette was born in 1955.



In 1960, the family returned to the U.S., and Bunny and the girls lived in Bartow while her husband was stationed at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. In 1961, Major Downing officially retired from the military, and the Downing family returned to St. Petersburg, FL.



Bunny taught Business and English at Sixteenth Street Junior High School (now John Hopkins Middle School) and later established the Business Department at Bay Point Middle School. Both Bunny and Al retired in 1983, she from her 44-year career with the Pinellas County public educational system.

After retirement, Bunny and Alvin remained extremely active, devoting themselves to the community and to each other. They were faithful members of First Baptist Institutional Church, one of the city's earliest Black churches. Both were active members of Greek letter organizations, Bunny with the Beta Alpha Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Rarely a day passed that Bunny didn't touch someone's life through her generosity; there were innumerable times when she would take groceries, diapers and clothing to students who were struggling with family hardships or unplanned pregnancies.



In 2009, the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor was bestowed posthumously on Al for his service in Tuskegee. For her civilian service at Tuskegee, Bunny, too, was honored. Both of them proudly wore the designation "Original Tuskegee Airman."

In 2011, Bunny accepted multiple posthumous honors on behalf of her late husband. Six months later at the age of 93, Bunny joined Al in heaven, bringing to a close a lifetime of ceaseless efforts to educate and lovingly meet the physical, emotional, and social needs of her students and community.

