

Civil rights champion forged equality for all in Rutherford

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In 1964, Robert Wesp saw his neighbors being told what blocks they could not live on and unable to rent some apartments in Rutherford. Instead of ignoring racial discrimination, Wesp took action. He created the first civil rights commission in Bergen County: the Rutherford Civil Rights Commission.

Wesp spent 40 years as the commission's chairman, taking on segregation, intimidation and discrimination throughout the borough. His life's mission was to "Do justice, show mercy, walk humbly."

Wesp died on June 5. He was 94.

The civil rights advocate's first venture into political and social activism began with compelling the Rutherford Board of Health to provide free polio vaccines for Rutherford children.

In 1964, after witnessing the injustices his black neighbors experienced, Wesp started the commission, where complaints could be filed and investigated — with outcomes of changed policies for future generations.

Wesp and fellow commissioners fought continuous battles against "blockbusting," or segregating blacks to certain areas in the borough, and employed white "testers" to see if landlords and real estate agents were engaging in discriminatory practices. The group won other victories in the 1960s and 1970s, successfully registering scores of black voters and eliminating a racist double standard from local beautician exams, which required black stylists to learn how to cut white people's hair but did not require white stylists to cut black people's hair.

One of Wesp's most notable achievements stemmed from the group's challenge of the Elks Club's "whites only" rule when the Rutherford chapter applied for a liquor license from the mayor and council in 1971. The case went to the Supreme Court. When the club reapplied for its license in 1974, the town dropped the discriminatory clause.

"Wesp served as the voice, if not the soul, of Rutherford's civil rights endeavors. Its mission [as stated in the enabling legislation] is to prevent discrimination against any person because of his or her sex, creed, color, national origin, ancestry or age. Wesp was particularly ardent about job discrimination and fighting the practice of 'red-lining,' which restricted blacks from purchasing houses in white neighborhoods," said Rod Leith, borough historian.

On April 5, 1968, the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Wesp joined other Rutherfordians marching down Park Avenue, holding a sign that said "Dr. King Lives On."

Today, the Rutherford Civil Rights Commission is still active and helps to resolve discrimination complaints.