GLADYS EDNA COOPER KIDD JENNINGS
1926–

GLADYS EDNA COOPER KIDD JENNINGS was the first African American woman and person of color to earn a master’s degree from WSU, in 1948. Gladys’s parents, both children of slaves, were her lifelong inspiration. Henry, a Presbyterian minister and Charlotte, a schoolteacher, had fled South Carolina to Ohio so their children could “get an education to get ahead.” Gladys’s natural optimism, drive and sunny disposition helped her overcome the extreme prejudice faced by African Americans. In high school Gladys became passionate about hospital dietetics which propelled her to get a BS in dietetics at Ohio State University.

Gladys was not content with a BS, so she applied to the graduate program at WSU. Gladys chose WSU for two reasons: she had a sister in California and thought Pullman was close to California and WSU was one of only a handful of places that offered her a teaching assistantship.

“I arrived in the middle of the night, and I wasn’t expected at the dormitory until the next day. The house mother had gone to bed, so the girls put me up in the parlor, from which I emerged early the next morning completely dressed — with hat!”

There was only one African American family in Pullman at the time and they helped stem some of Gladys’s loneliness. She also was a passionate member of the International club, a place where Gladys “could identify with some diversity.”

Gladys received a Fulbright Fellowship to the University of London in 1954. She taught at Syracuse University and North Carolina College, chaired the home economics department at Spelman College, and served as a hospital dietitian. Gladys returned to teach at WSU in 1966 where she was instrumental in many multicultural student programs and equity and diversity initiatives.