

Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: The Project Continues

# A Student Remembers A Star Teacher During A Critical Time

By Camille Fly Dautrich

It's the fall of 1970, and for Water Valley and Davidson High Schools, it's going to be a whole new world. Total school integration has begun, and now all students, regardless of race, will be learning in the same building.

I can't speak for the black experience, but I know we white kids recognized that those students had given up their school building, the Davidson name and their mascot, the Tigers. We were all now Water Valley Blue Devils, and that was that.

Looking back, I think for all of us it was sort of like moving to a new town, albeit with many of your friends moving with you. Suddenly, we had to get to know a whole new group of people and share classrooms, lockers, the cafeteria and other territories. It's been nearly 50 years, but I know we white kids were pretty nervous, and I can only imagine the experience from the other side.

Still, as Nike says, we Just Did It. We got to know each other, and we got along. It wasn't perfect, but it wasn't terrible either.

Sports, I believe, were a major factor in bringing us all together. Football and basketball, where we were forced (if that's the word) to travel together, eat together, shower together and most of all, play together as a team, were great equalizers and helped forge our friendships.

But some things we didn't do. First and foremost, we almost never hung out together outside of school. No black girls came to my house on weekends to practice putting on makeup and talk about boys, or to load up the car and go to a movie in Oxford. Similarly, I was never invited to any of their houses. But we tried, and in many ways, we succeeded. I will always be proud of that.

Into this situation, which could have been volatile, came our teachers, black and white, who I'm sure were just as nervous as we were about this brave new world we were entering. Many in both races worked hard to keep us together and to make the year a success. In this column, I want to concentrate on Ethel Hudson Morgan, our home economics teacher.

I don't want to make Mrs. Morgan sound like a stereotype, but I'm telling the truth when I say she was small but strong, quiet but forceful and most of all, really intelligent. And she always has had the most beautiful smile. Still, only recently did I learn more about her.

The ninth of 10 children born in Coffeenville to Alex and Onia Hudson, Ethel and her family moved to Water Valley when she was in the third grade.

"My parents didn't have much money," she told me, but "(they) instilled great values in their children. They taught us to love God, work hard and get a good education."

To help with family finances, Ethel started to work for an elderly white lady at the corner of Main and Clay Streets when she was in the 8th grade. She was there every day before and after school through the 9th grade as well. "I left home early enough to stop by her house and prepare



**Camille Fly Dautrich (left) expresses gratitude for the strong example set by her former teacher, Ethel Hudson Morgan, during a critical time.**

her breakfast and lunch," she said. "I left her lunch in the refrigerator for her to eat at lunchtime (and) on the way home from school, I prepared her supper." Then on Saturdays, Ethel returned and cleaned the lady's house.

When she was a little older, Ethel said she worked as a maid or a babysitter and continued doing both jobs throughout the summers when she was home from college. "I could always get a job as either a maid or a babysitter," she explained.

Miss Hudson, at the time, graduated as valedictorian of her Davidson high school class in 1965. She was active in a number of organizations, most notably the New Homemakers of America, which was the all-black equivalent of what was then the all-white Future Homemakers of America.

After integration in the early 1970s, Ethel was instrumental in merging the two clubs. She was chosen to serve on the Mississippi state committee to re-write the bylaws and the constitution of the organization.

Ethel was the branch secretary for the first Water Valley NAACP chapter started in 1970, which by June 1971 listed 70 active members.

Ethel attended Alcorn State University in Lorman, MS, where she continued her outstanding academic record, graduating magna cum laude in 1969 and taking part in several sororities and honor societies, including Who's Who Among Students in Universities and Colleges. She married fellow educator James Morgan in 1968. Next came Ole Miss, where she received her master's degree in 1973.

While Ethel worked on

her master's degree, she also taught at Water Valley High School, where she sponsored the FHA Club (later FHA/HERO when males were admitted) and the junior class.

This is when I got to know her, and I am pleased to say today that part of who I am I owe to her. She taught me a lot about cooking (and by the way, Ethel, I made my one and only homemade piecrust in your class; I've cheated and bought them ever since!) but like many of my other teachers, she taught me a lot more.

Ethel Morgan taught me that you don't have to be white to be a good person. Honestly, I knew that already, but she didn't tell me that—she showed me by the way she lived. She taught me that honesty and hard work are two things that will always stand you in good stead.

On the other hand, she also taught me that, in the unlikely event I was trying to copy something off Kim Horan's test paper because I couldn't remember the answer, a well-placed "stink eye" in my direction could shame me enough to miss that question honestly, not answer it dishonestly!

After retiring from teaching, Ethel opened a business, Ethel's Footwear and Accessories, which operated from 1995 to 2002. But the very next year, she faced a much bigger challenge than teaching a bunch of giggly high-school girls or running her own business.

In 2003, Ethel was diagnosed with cancer. I remember being devastated when I heard this because my own sister, Harriet Samuels Nelson, had died of cancer in 1988. But Ethel persevered, becoming a leading volunteer with

the American Cancer Society. She served as team captain and later as Yalobusha County Relay for Life chairperson. In 2006 she traveled to Washington, D.C., to lobby with nearly 4,000 other Relay for Life Community Ambassadors, all of them, she said, "energetic, committed people who had been touched by cancer and were passionate about . . . eradicating the disease." Ethel returned to Washington several times to continue this important work. She was named Mississippi Volunteer of the Year 2006-2007 by the Mid-South Division of the American Cancer Society and received four additional awards in 2009.

Ethel has been honored for her work, both with the American Cancer Society and the FHA, and closer to home, she and her husband James were chosen to be Grand Marshals of the Water Valley Christmas Parade in 2017.

Perhaps most important to Ethel, however, is her church, and here, too, she is an exemplary volunteer. "I am a born-again Christian," she said, "and a member of Zion Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Coffeenville. I serve as a Sunday School teacher, an usher, and the correspondence secretary. I also serve as the recording secretary for the Mount Moriah District Missionary Baptist Association, which includes 30 Baptist churches in Yalobusha, Grenada, Calhoun and Panola Counties."

A few years back, my husband Barry and I were visiting Water Valley from Branson, Mo, where we live, and I told him I wanted to see my old Home Ec teacher. When Ethel opened her front door, Barry started laughing. "Camille told me you were OLD," he said. "You're not old at all." He was right. Turns out they graduated from college the same year. Although in my defense, I meant "old" teacher meaning "in the past," not her actual age!

So thank you, Mrs. Morgan, for all you taught me, not just in the classroom but about how to live a good life. Even though I don't see you much, I remember you fondly and think of you often. I heard someone say once about his college professors that while he might not remember many specific things they taught him, he remembered that they taught him how to study, how to learn and how to live. I'm happy and honored to say that many of my teachers and professors taught me those same things, and Ethel, you are most definitely one of them.

Camille is the new friend that I wrote about in a previous column, "Segregation Side Effects." Her high school class was the first class to graduate in 1971 following the state mandated integration of public schools in Mississippi. She is a journalist in her own right and has promised to write more soon.

Ethel's work history is even more remarkable given that she was only in the 8th and 9th grades when she prepared breakfast and lunch each day for a Mrs. Walton, a white woman, before going to school. In the summers she cleaned house and babysat for Linda Gordon and another white woman named Mrs.



By Dottie Chapman Reed

*Reed is a native of Water Valley and graduated from Davidson High School in 1970. She has launched a project to compile and share info about women in the county who have made an impact on the African American community. Her column appears bi-monthly, with occasional exceptions.*

*She can be reached at (678) 825-2356 or reed2318@bellsouth.net*

Furhman. In high school she worked for a fourth white woman, a Mrs. Morgan, and then for Dr. and Mrs. Hedges on the weekends.

Finally, every summer when she came home from college, she worked for Ruth and Warren Ray, the owners of Rays Department Store. No surprise that Ethel has been so successful and her life so rewarding. And no surprise either that she had such a positive impact on Camille and numerous other students and also set a great example for her fellow teachers during such a critical time.

The tensions of this moment in Mississippi history

hit home to me in February, when a former Jackson area high school principal, a white man now living in Water Valley, called to say how much he was enjoying the column. He said that when freedom of choice ended, and mandatory school integration began in the fall of 1970, he and his staff were in shock – lost really. They were so lost that the black teachers were afraid to discipline the white kids, and the white teachers were afraid to discipline the black kids. After two months, he said to one of his colleagues, a black male teacher "what are we doing?... These are just kids doing what kids do." From that point on all went well.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Weekend Events At The VFW Include Bingo, Dance

Events at VFW Post 4100 for the weekend will begin with bingo on Friday night, March 15. Doors will open at 5 p.m. and the games begin at 7 p.m. Providing music for the Saturday night dance on March 16, will be the Bobby Hood Band. The music begins at 8 p.m. and concludes at midnight. Post 4100 is located at 11535 Highway 315, west of Water Valley.

### Book Signing Honoring Author Shirley Faye Hentz Is March 16

A book signing honoring Shirley Faye Hentz, author of "Unless You Believe," will be held Saturday, March 16, from 12 p.m. until 4 p.m. This event will be held in Fountain Square, 218 Frostland Drive, Water Valley. Everyone is invited to attend.

### Democratic Party Committee Meets On March 23

The Democratic Party Committee of Yalobusha County will meet on Saturday, March 23, beginning at 10 a.m., in the Yalobusha County Court House at Water Valley. Everyone is welcome to attend. Refreshments will be served.

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