

Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: The Project continues Mother And Daughter Played Key Roles In The Integration Of Water Valley High In 1966

Turbulence - both foreign and domestic - dominated the 22 months between January 1966 and October 1967. Not only was the nation enmeshed in the Vietnam war, but on the home front African Americans stepped up their drive to ensure the full legal equality promised under the Constitution, including enforcement of recently passed laws designed to grant access to public facilities, housing, education and the ballot box.

A timeline of events (right) from this period illustrates the tumult, with some of the signal moments occurring in Mississippi.

In August 1966, amid the tensions of the time, Mable Hervey hesitantly allowed her oldest daughter, Annette, to join two other high school seniors to become the first black students to attend Water Valley High School. The late Dorothy Boston, Dorothy Neely and Annette made history when they enrolled at Water Valley High, and then became the first black students to graduate from the formerly all-white school in May 1967. What courage it must have taken for this mother to acquiesce in her daughter's desire for a better education, though she surely knew that her child could be a catalyst for integration in the segregated South.

What gave Mable Hervey this strength, when the average mother is so often filled with anxiety simply sending a child to his or her first day of elementary school? Mrs. Hervey knew that the first day for Annette and the other girls could go very, very wrong. Fortunately, it did not.

Here is how Annette describes her mom today and recounts their life experiences in Yalobusha County:

My mother, Mable Alexander-Hervey was born April 27, 1926. She was married to Ned L. Hervey and eight children were born from this union. Her parents, Cleveland Alexander and Hattie Person-Alexander were share croppers. Mable was the 4th of eight children, six girls and 2 boys. She worked on her father-in-law Esley Hervey's farm, at the Motts Poultry factory in Water Valley, and retired from Harley's Tool plant.

My mother was an active member of the usher board at Pine Grove East Church, until her health began to decline earlier this year. She always responded to the request when called upon to usher for funerals and worked with the Mt. Moriah Association. Mom currently lives with my youngest sister, Elgenia McClish in Wichita, Kansas. When she gets the urge to check on the home place my brother, Jesse, a wounded Vietnam veteran, travels from Delaware to accompany her to Mississippi.

When she was more active, her hobbies included quilting, working in the yard with her flowers, canning and freezing food. All the neighbors knew she enjoyed putting up vegetables and would often stop by to give her fruits and vegetables. My mother loved entertaining after Sunday church, getting up early every Sunday to cook dinner before she attended service, and having her sister, Hattie Walls and others stop by to have dinner with her later. Mom often took food to her sister-in-law and sick and shut-in neighbors. Now at 92, she still loves fishing and goes as often as someone will take her.

My mother believes in education, when she was not able to help me with my math, she would drive me to Mr. John Eddie Wright's house, where he tutored me. She still stresses to her grandchildren that education is one of the keys to success. When asked for her thoughts now about my deciding to attend Water Valley High she says she became comfortable with my decision because she knew that I love to do my best in what I love.

Whatever Mrs. Mable Hervey and Annette Hervey Westmoreland are made of, I hope I have some. In addition to Annette and Jesse, Mrs. Mable has a daughter, Mable Lynn and son, DeRoy who live in Maryland, two sons, Amos and George and daughter, Elgenia all living in Wichita, Kansas. Her daughter Flora passed away in 1993. Flora and I spent a summer working at Headstart together and became fast friends. The union of Mr. Ned and Mrs. Mable Hervey has produced 21 grandchildren, 43 great grandchildren and 11 great-great grandchildren.

I find it perplexing that Annette had not previously spoken at length about her experience integrating WVHS. Here is how she now recalls the experience:

I attended Water Valley High School my last year of high school, 1966-1967. At that time, they were letting certain grades integrate the school, and you did not need your parents' signature, I signed myself up. I talked to my teachers and principal at Davidson High [the school for Black students] and they were okay with it, and I went for it. I decided to go for one reason only: I knew Water Valley High had the best curriculum and classes.

I did not have any major problems at WVHS. I lived on the farm and had to be bussed to school. The superintendent/principal had me sitting on the very front seat of the school bus so the driver could have a clear view of me. I usually had the seat by myself, but one young girl would always sit on the seat with me. I guess she figured out that I was not contagious. My mom was not happy about it when she found out I had signed myself up. However, my dad never showed any negative feelings about me going to WVHS. I have attended a few of the WVHS class reunions, but I always attend the class reunion of Davidson High, because I was with them 11 years.

Annette's telling makes this historical moment sound much too routine. I needed more clarification, and so I asked more questions. Here is what I learned:

Annette heard about the opportunity to attend WVHS from the Davidson teachers and staff. She and Dorothy Neely talked about enrolling together. Annette admits that her mother had some concerns and reservations, while her father and siblings were okay with it from the start. When I asked how the Boston and Neely families - and other black families reacted, she said she heard nothing largely because these families didn't see each other regularly. The girls only went to school and town on the weekend, and because the families didn't go to the same church, the girls only saw their friends at school. However, Annette

1966

January 10 - NAACP local chapter president Vernon Dahmer is injured by a bomb in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He dies the next day.

June 5 - James Meredith begins a solitary March Against Fear from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. Shortly after starting, he is shot with birdshot and injured. Civil rights leaders and organizations rally and continue the march leading to, on June 16, Stokely Carmichael first using the slogan Black power in a speech. Twenty-five thousand marchers entered the capital.

Summer - The Chicago Open Housing Movement, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., James Bevel and Al Raby, includes a large rally, marches, and demands to Mayor Richard J. Daley and the City of Chicago which are discussed in a movement-ending Summit Conference.

October - Black Panther Party founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California.

1967

April 4 - MLK delivers "Beyond Vietnam" speech, calling for defeat of "the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism".

June 12 - In Loving v. Virginia, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that prohibiting interracial marriage is unconstitutional.

In the trial of accused killers in the murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, the jury convicts 7 of 18 accused men. Conspirator Edgar Ray Killen is later convicted in 2005.

June - August - Over 150 communities burn during the Long, Hot Summer of 1967. The largest and deadliest riots of the summer take place in Newark, New Jersey and Detroit with 26 fatalities reported in Newark and 43 people losing their lives in the Motor City.

October 2 - Thurgood Marshall is sworn in as the first African-American justice of the United States Supreme Court.



Annette Hervey Westmoreland

felt that the black community was supportive overall.

The girls took all of their classes together, and Annette added that the teachers - all of them white - treated them fairly and even with kindness. She truly admired one teacher, Mrs. Harvey.

Annette believed they were adequately prepared to succeed at WVHS because they had done well at Davidson. They also believed that is why the teachers and principal supported them when they applied to attend WVHS. Annette felt that they represented themselves, their families and the black community well and did participate in some extracurricular activities.

When asked about the attitudes of the white student body, Annette described them as "okay." She and the other two girls did not hang out with them at all, and she continued, "As long as they didn't bother us we were okay with being there." The three made it a point to ignore any racist comments or outward bias. But she noted that while she and her friends sat together at lunch every day in the cafeteria, none of the other students joined them.

Asked if she made any friends that she has maintained to date, she mentioned Linda Winters and Diane Redwine, girls "who had no problem with blacks," she said.

Annette graduated and started college at Northwest Mississippi Junior College went on to Jackson State College and graduated from Spencerian College of Business in Milwaukee, Wis. She earned a Christian Education Diploma from American Baptist College, became a certified Dean for Christian Leadership School through the Sunday School Publishing Board and National Baptist Congress of Christian Education.

Engaged in the greater Milwaukee community, Annette served as a Dean of Christian Education, Christian Education Team Leader, Sunday School Teacher and Angel Choir Pianist at Mount Olive Baptist Church in the city. She was also an Associate Dean of the Wisconsin General Baptist State Congress of Christian Education. Annette volunteered with Child Evangelism, an after-school program in some of the Milwaukee area schools. She continues that volunteer work now in Arizona.

When in college she began a 37-plus year career with Miller Brewing Company, retiring in 2010. Annette and her husband, Lee, have four adult children, four grandchildren and now reside in Buckeye, Arizona.

While Annette and her mom handled the integration of Water Valley High almost casually, their apparent calm masked a much more complicated atmosphere behind the scenes - some aspects likely forever hidden. As a freshman in high school at Davidson at the time I knew that all eyes were on the situation. There was an unspoken tension coupled with a lot of prayers that all would go well for them.

Annette, Dorothy B. and Dorothy N. had the courage to be first. Attempts to reach Ms. Neely have thus far been unsuccessful, but I plan to keep trying to reach her. Though I could have attended Water Valley High for my last two years of high school, I choose not to. The white students - who passed me every day on their bus ride to school - made it clear from the faces they made through the windows along with the occasional comment that I would not be welcome.

We are grateful for these brave women and for the mothers, fathers and families who forged ahead in 1967-68. Their efforts were crucial as the school system moved to total integration and Davidson High School graduated



By Dottie
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its last class in 1970.

A December 2014 article in the Jackson Free Press - "Then and Now: When 'School Choice' Creates a Divide" - provides history and context for this complex moment:

Between the 1950's and the end of the century, former Mississippi Governor William Winter, said Mississippians desire for an improved education system increased. During most of the mid-20th century, white Mississippians supported funding quality public education—as long as schools were segregated racially.

Before the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education case, which declared school segregation unconstitutional, leaders in Mississippi didn't have an interest in "school choice." It wasn't until segregationists lost the battle to keep white public schools white that the attacks on public schools—and the demand for "school choice"—began in earnest.

Avoiding Desegregation

"School choice" is a hot-button political phrase, used in some form since the 1960s. At its most generic, it means giving parents an option of where to send their kids to school beyond the traditional public school of the district in which they live, while still using public dollars, such as with charter schools. In recent decades, "school choice" was a kinder, gentler way to refer to school vouchers, meaning that a family could get a "voucher" for taxes they paid and use the funds at a private school instead, a failed idea that is regaining political traction.

During legal segregation years, it was a ploy called "freedom-of-choice" that Mississippi began to implement after Brown specifically to avoid desegregating public schools. After the 1954 Brown decision, the state of Mississippi first ignored the federal mandate to integrate. But when the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed, Mississippi was at risk of losing its federal funding for public schools if it did not desegregate public schools. In 1965, the state agreed to follow the act, but tried to avoid desegregation in other ways—especially with its "freedom of choice" strategy.

School districts allowed parents to cross district lines when determining where to send their kids to school—black children could go to white schools, but most wouldn't. The African American families who did send their children to white schools were met with the loss of jobs, cross burnings, harassment and eviction. Black families feared for their children's safety in white schools.

"Freedom-of-choice plans left segregated patterns of schooling in Mississippi all but untouched; the reasons had little to do with either freedom or choice," historian Joseph Crespino writes in his book, "In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution."

Private "segregation academies"—which only allowed white students—began to pop up across the state after Brown and especially after the 1970 order from the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to desegregate.

The greatest hike in private academies was from 1968-1971, in which they grew from educating just over 5,000 to 40,000 students in the state as the court grew closer to forcing southern schools to desegregate in early 1970."

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