

Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: The Project continues

Mae Turner White And Bettye White Milledge: Mothers And Mentors – Like Mother Like Daughter

The magic of this project, Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County, allows us to identify and tell, in any form, the stories of amazing women, living or dead, who have influenced lives in a profound way.

Wade and Dorothy Mae White's house was always a home away from home for me, and it remains so today. If I need a place to stay in Water Valley, the welcome mat is always out, and the door is always open. The first time I spent the night at the White's house in elementary school, I was in awe of the family dynamics: four girls and two boys.

The baby girl, Alice Faye, was my best friend. Her sisters were so beautiful, and her dad was too funny. However, I was almost afraid of her mom. But because she ran her family with such power and finesse, I was able to see that the key to holding it all together was love and the love of the Lord. Mrs. Mae yet holds that strength, even after having recently lost a third child. Today, you can still see the results of that strength in her daughters, nieces, nephews and grandchildren.

The pain on Mrs. Mae's face is visible when she mentions that her feet hurt now from the 26 years that she stood in water on concrete floors on the assembly line at Mott's chicken processing plant. Why did she and so many others do it? To provide for their families is why – because farming and cleaning white families' homes could no longer secure their basic needs.

Mrs. Mae, though, worked for more than just her husband and six children. In 1969 she lost her sister, Velma Joiner, a mother of seven children – four boys and 3 girls – living in Memphis and ranging in age from 16 to 3. Mrs. Mae took the youngest two girls full-time until they were old enough to start school with their family in Memphis. She probably worked the night shift at the chicken plant to be available to care for the girls during the day. Mrs. Mae became and still is the surrogate mother for the Joiner children. She raised her six and her sister's seven with the help of her youngest sister, Asariner, known as Rene, and her husband, Mr. Wade.

Every weekend following their mother's death, the Joiner children came to the White's house, and it became their second home. Even though their Aunt Rene lived in Wisconsin, she helped transport the children to Water Valley as often as she could. The boys continued to attend school in Memphis during the week. But they looked forward to the weekends, feeling loved and nurtured with cousins and friends they made through the White family.

As soon as Marvin, the oldest son, was able to drive, he and his dad and three brothers came to Water Valley every weekend to be with the girls. The youngest girl, Jackie, went on to play scholarship basketball for Northwest Junior College and DePaul University. She now works in the sheriff's department in Shelby County, Tenn.

Today, Marvin recalls how much he enjoyed the family surroundings, espe-



Mae Turner White (left) and Bettye White Milledge (top right and bottom picture)



cially the baseball diamond that was in the White's front yard, where kids from all around came to play.

This became so routine, he said, that no one had to tell the kids when it was time to go home. Marvin, who is now retired after 39 years with Humko Chemical Company, described how his cousin, Bettye, stayed with them in Memphis during the summers and jokingly remembered how she made sure they always looked presentable in matching clothes — no stripes and checks together!

Back in Water Valley, Bettye was a magnet for family and friends who gathered at the White compound in the evenings for basketball games, roasting marshmallows, and generally having a great time. And through her example, she imbued everyone around her with hope, aspirations and a strong moral code.

Bettye White Milledge, Mrs. Mae's oldest daughter, is a present day Outstanding Black Woman of Yalobusha County. Her resume overwhelms me. She graduated from Davidson High in 1966, married her high school sweetheart, moved to Chicago, and raised a son and daughter. But Bettye never lost her determination to continue her education. She had earned over 100 hours at Malcolm X College when she transferred to Roosevelt College to complete a Bachelor of General Studies degree in 1979 with a concentration in early childhood education. In 1985, she earned her Master of Science degree with a concentration in administration and rehabilitation from DePaul University.

Bettye's career includes several key positions in education in Illinois, Michigan, Texas, Ohio and Georgia. Since 1996, she has worked as the senior regional director for Charter School Administration Services based in Oak Park, Mich. She is also the Superintendent for CSAS Texas Schools. Bettye has been the lead person in the start-

up of 11 charter schools. Educators in Kansas, Arizona, and Florida have drawn on her expertise. Her extensive volunteerism includes work with Optimist International - as member, trainer, and president of the club and lieutenant governor of seven clubs. She also worked as a member of the Advisory Council on Adult, Vocational, and Technical Education, appointed by former Illinois governor James R. Thompson.

However, her passion is in her educational consulting business, where she mentors young black women and men who want to start their own businesses and/or complete their education. She has successfully mentored many from within the charter school arena, especially encouraging the teacher's aides to complete degrees so they could become teachers or work in administration.

Closer to home, when her son-in-law became so dissatisfied with his work that he had to leave, she coached him on starting his own endeavor: a dental assistant training institute in Georgia. His school, now in its third year and open to those who have finished high school, has graduated three classes and has established strong ties with the medical community, resulting in successful placements for his graduates.

Even closer, Bettye's daughter, Angelia, is administrative assistant to the chairman of the Paulding County, Georgia, board of commissioners.

Bettye shares her love and the importance of reading with her mentees in workshops and in her training sessions with charter school teachers. Her granddaughter, a junior in high school, passes through the room while Bettye and I are talking and happens to mention that with a few days left in 2018, she has read 30-plus books this year and is still counting.

Reflecting on her childhood in Water Valley, Bettye appreciates the closeness of her immediate family and

her Sanders Chapel Church family. Potluck dinners and BTU (Baptist Training Union) meetings stand out. She remembers, too, getting off the school bus and heading to their fish pond, eating plums and blackberries on the way. An even bigger treat was the occasional visit to Mr. Jesse Woodard's fish pond in nearby Panola County, which was always so well-stocked.

Bettye was super active and very popular in high school. She played basketball, sang in the glee club, and was a member of the Honor Society and the Student Council. On the state level, Bettye was president of the 4H Club. She loved high school at Davidson and credits her late teachers, Margaret Burgess Campbell and Mary Louise Campbell, for her love of education. The latter teacher gave her a C in math, and Bettye, accustomed to making only A's and B's, was astounded and asked Mrs. Campbell to explain. She told Bettye that she was trying to slow her down so she could focus and set clear goals.

Bettye was concerned about the second-hand books she and her classmates had to use and how her school closed so that black children could help pick cotton even if it deprived them of extra days of learning. She surmised early on that the white leaders did not care about her education and that of other black children in Water Valley.

Even while she was still in high school, Bettye worked in inspections at the same chicken plant where her mother worked. She also babysat white babies and worked in white families' kitchens. Through these experiences, she saw the way blacks were expected to speak and act in the presence of whites. And it bothered her when she heard how her parents and other black adults had to say "yes sir" and "yes ma'am" to whites barely older than she was, and then be addressed by only their first names. With babysitting paying \$3 a day and picking cotton \$15 per week, Bettye knew education was a way out.

Nonetheless, Bettye speaks of her genuine love of Water Valley and considered moving back. However, painful memories still linger: the segregated movie theater; the white public pool that closed, it seemed, suddenly, with no explanation; the unspoken worry during James Meredith's attempt to integrate Ole Miss in the fall of 1962. Because my family lived on the outskirts of town, we couldn't see what was happening up town, nor did we children know whatever the adults knew. But we sensed the tension. I remember being nervous and afraid seeing my grandmother on the front porch anxiously whispering about her concerns over what was happening. But the adults kept their worries from us children. We were not allowed to go beyond our front yards for days until this volatile episode was over. I now understand that the Water Valley National Guard Unit was indeed activated and sent up to Oxford, 18 miles away.

Now, the lack of progress and economic development in Water Valley, the largest



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.

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of the county seats, is disappointing, with only one grocery store, the Big Yank building sitting empty on North Main Street for years and years, and the pending closure of the chicken plant.

Bettye hopes that young people and millennials growing up or living in Water Valley now, will take their education and civic involvement much more seriously, especially registering and voting when eligible. Her deepest yearning is for them to understand that they must control their destiny and not cede it to the decision makers, power players, and those in Water Valley supposedly in charge of the crucial decisions that impact livelihood, identity, education, equal and business opportunities, and health care.

Bettye describes her career path as rewarding and challenging. Yet, she states God prepared her for the

challenges, including surviving and recovering from three strokes, the first in 2016. She is planning to retire from CSAS this month for the second time and, is ready for leisure travel and to continue to enjoy her husband, family and friends. She now resides in Hiram, Ga., where she spends as much time as possible fishing. Moving forward, she wants to volunteer for the Boys and Girls Clubs. She just cannot stop giving back. Thank goodness!

If there is a Mae White or Bettye Milledge, who influenced your life and the lives of others in an impactful and positive way, let me know! You can acknowledge, express appreciation, share experiences, funny stories, quotes, philosophies, and more in this column. Your recommendations and comments are welcomed.

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