

Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: The Project Continues

Juanita Polk Fleming – What A Woman – What A Woman – A Superwoman

At this year's July Fourth Homecoming Day Festival in Sallis, Miss., I caught up with Juanita Polk Fleming and her husband, Jesse. They are members of a cooperative that supports the event, now in its 12th year. As Juanita showed me around on a sizzling hot day, I could feel the respect and adoration each vendor had for her as she stopped to make purchases – the very appealing sweet potato pies, cakes and watermelons.

Juanita and I had talked recently but could not pinpoint where our paths crossed while growing up in Yalobusha. Most likely it was at Bayson Missionary Baptist Church, where we attended events as children. Her par-

ents, Will and Sallie Polk, and her Uncle James and Aunt Gencie Polk were lifelong members of Bayson. Juanita is one of 10 children and first cousin to her aunt and uncles' 17 children. Serving God, community service and education remain cornerstones of the Polk families' activities.

At the festival I kept hearing, "Hi, Mrs. Fleming," from all ages, especially from her former students. As a teacher, apparently Juanita molded many successful individuals including her own sons, Jesse, Jr. and Jeffery. Her friend, Linda Lewis Jamison and Juanita's sons, tell us more about yet another outstanding woman of Yalobusha County.



By Dottie
Chapman Reed

Reed is a native of Water Valley and graduated from Davidson High School in 1970. This article is part of 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

A Defining Reach Beyond Yalobusha

By Linda Lewis Jamison

When Juanita Polk Fleming migrated to the small town of Sallis, Mississippi, the residents had no idea how her electrifying personality would affect them. After graduating from Central High School in Coffeeville, she attended Alcorn State University where she met her husband Jesse. After Juanita graduated from Alcorn in 1970, she taught home economics for a year in the Tunica, MS public schools – before Tunica became the recreational mecca it is today. Then she married Jesse James Fleming, and they homesteaded on his family's farm in Sallis, where Juanita became an integral part of the community.

Juanita began teaching elementary reading at Long Creek School because there were no available home economics positions in the area. Not only did she influence many students in the classroom, but she also served several years as the assistant principal. In addition, Juanita assisted with the state testing program and does to this day, even though she has retired. While she was employed, Juanita also helped with many extracurricular activities such as the annual Spring Fling Carnival and Pageant.

In her retirement, Juanita remains connected to education, serving as the president of the local Retired Educational Personnel of Mississippi. This allows her to continue influencing the students of Attala County. Juanita's former students and co-workers remember her as an extremely thorough, capable, and compassionate educator who sought not only to teach academics, but also to help mold the students into successful, productive adults who possess integrity and high moral character.

In addition to her professional endeavors,

Juanita and her husband Jesse have influenced the community in other ways. She has served on the Board of Directors of the Oprah Winfrey Boys and Girls Club and continues to help with their fundraising even though she is no longer on the board. She and Jesse helped found and are active members of the Self-Help Co-op, which provides educational and other assistance to farmers. They also sponsor an annual Father-Son fishing tournament on their private lake. And they partner with their church in a Blessing of the Bikes Ceremony in the spring. This Ceremony, similar to the Blessing of the Fleet, is for motorcycles, bicycles, ATV's and their drivers. Jesse's tenure as the first black on the Attala County Board of Supervisors highlighted the couple's importance to the community.

Along with serving the residents of Sallis professionally and in community affairs, Juanita also participates in the area's religious activities. She is a member of Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church, where she is the church's announcer. Jesse is a deacon, and she is a deaconess. In this capacity, she helps prepare the communion table and assists with the benevolence the church extends to the needy – members and non-members alike. Juanita also works in other ministry areas such as vacation bible school, transporting friends to and from medical appointments and providing her signature dishes to the sick and shut in.

Juanita truly exemplifies the teachings of Jesus concerning servanthood, and she and Jesse have sought to instill these values in their sons, Jesse and Jeffery, and their grandchildren. Juanita Polk Fleming has been and still is a truly positive, electrifying influence on the residents of rural Attala County and beyond.



Juanita is pictured with siblings (back row, from left) Carl Polk, Juanita Fleming, Ernestine Matthews and Willie Polk; and (front row, from left) Inez Turner, Onia Anderson, Ora Lee Phillips and Elnora Kyles.

Six Lessons From A Teacher

By Jesse and Jeffery Fleming

On Nov. 9th, 1949 Willie and Sallie Polk welcomed their 9th child and 5th daughter, Juanita, to the world. Born and reared in Coffeeville, Juanita graduated from Central High School before going off to college at Alcorn State University. Attending Alcorn State University proved to be one of the most significant decisions that she made as she met our father, Jesse J. Fleming, there. This is also where we (Jesse K. and Jeffery) went to school.

Mom spent most of her professional career as a teacher and assistant principal at Long Creek Elementary in our hometown of Sallis. Although teaching was her profession, the lessons that she taught extended well beyond the classroom. How she lives her life has taught us more valuable lessons than any textbook written. Here are a few lessons from Juanita.

Lesson 1 – Our mom taught us how to serve with her commitment to the Sallis and Attala County communities. She taught night-classes for people who wanted to get their GED, tutored students after school, and taught summer school occasionally. She served as secretary for the Sunday School and church business meetings. Additionally, she spent several years as the president of our church choir. This was before we got fancy and created the "Minister of Music" title. The fact that our father was also a teacher and superintendent of our Sunday school made them an awesome, evenly yoked couple. She served those who were in need or needed any support. "Don't brag on what you do for others. Let God brag on you," she would say. It's a lesson we grew to understand.

Lesson 2 – She taught us how to survive. Our mother poured into our lives and helped us transition from boys to men. Mom was a home economics major when she was at Alcorn. Dad often said that was one of the reasons he wanted to marry her. She was a great cook, enjoyed cooking and she taught us how to cook.

My brother Jesse paid more attention in the cooking classes than I did. I followed

our dad's plan and found a wife who knew how to cook! She probably didn't know that I was comparing her meals to mom's. I can remember the Saturday morning when my mom taught me how to iron. She tricked me into believing that ironing was fun! Little did I know that the joke was on me, as she had just gotten out of ironing my clothes for the rest of her life. I thought she was smiling because she was proud of me. It was not until the next Saturday, when I was ironing again, that I figured out why she really was smiling!

Lesson 3 – She taught us how to show love. Her love started at home, and then it spread. She demonstrated how to have a loving relationship with your family no doubt influenced by coming from a family of 10 siblings with lots of love to go around. Mom was diligent about speaking regularly with her brothers and sisters. We can remember countless trips up and down I-55 between Sallis and Coffeeville to stay with Momma Sallie and visiting with all our aunts, uncles, and cousins. During the summers, we took vacations to Chicago to visit Aunts Onia and Elnora and Uncle Winfield. One favorite trip was to visit Uncle Bubba in South Carolina. At the end of that visit, our parents surprised us and took us to Disney World in Orlando. In showing us how to love our mom also taught us how to smile. She kept a smile on her face – even in the hardest moments and even when she disciplined us.

Lesson 4 – She taught us how to support one another. Mom supported us through all our extracurricular activities while we were in school (football, basketball, band, choirs, track, and countless clubs and organizations). She frequently dropped us off and picked us up from practices before we could drive ourselves. She also attended our games and events regularly and



Juanita and Jesse Fleming are pictured with sons Jeffery and Jesse, Jr.

sometimes ended up helping or leading parent support committees for many of the organizations.

Mom taught us the value of hard work and how to be resourceful. Teaching is one of those all-encompassing jobs that doesn't allow you to leave your work at work. So, on many days she would come home, prepare a meal for us, and get back to grading papers and developing lesson plans. As we got older, she was able to use us as her teacher's aides, grading papers for her while she cooked dinner and completed other household duties.

She was always supportive of dad whether it was his career in education, public service, or any of his "serial entrepreneurial adventures." We grew up attending NAACP meetings, Attala County Beat 4 Improvement Club meetings, and Alcorn State alumni chapter meetings. All these meetings planted seeds in us that would help us understand the importance of giving back to the community and making it better. This has helped shape our lives as we continue to work in our churches and communities in Tennessee and Arkansas.

Lesson 5 – She taught us about the Savior. Our mom set a perfect example of a God-fearing mother and wife. She is a Proverbs 31 virtuous woman. She also spent time teaching Sunday School at Mt. Olive M.B. Church, and she and dad kept



Grandchildren for Juanita and Jesse Fleming are (back row, from left) Dionna, Devon, Jesse, Jocelyn and Jady.

us in church. On our family road trips, we only listened to sermons and church songs. Mom looked at these trips as sleeping pills, nodding off soon after we were on our way.

When I was 10 and Jeff was 6, we sat in the backseat signaling the big trucks passing by to blow their horns. This scared mom, and she would jump out of her sleep and grab the dashboard. My dad would just laugh, and she would fall back to sleep, not knowing we were signaling the trucks to blow. But when we signaled the trucks about three more times, she figured it out and gave us a warning: "If I hear another horn again, you are going to meet your Savior." To this day, I don't blow my horn when she's in the car!

Lesson 6 – She taught us how to sacrifice and share. She continues to teach these values to her five grandchildren, attending baptisms, kindergarten, elementary, and middle school graduations, and soccer and basketball games. She is always a willing host for any of them during the summer and for holidays.

These are just a few of the many lessons that we learned from mom over the years. Even after her "official" retirement from the classroom, mom still pours into the lives of students, family, and friends each and every day. She is a Superwoman!!!

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