

Dr. Louise Baker Brown: Clothed With Strength And Dignity

Just like my experience reading about Emma Gooch, my friend and classmate, I thought I knew Louise Baker Brown. I was wrong, and now I want to tell you what I have learned about yet another outstanding black woman of Yalobusha County. I will start by noting what I knew or thought I knew: that she was from Coffeeville and that she was smart, according to my late sister, Faye, who taught her in high school.

I remember one day running into my Hi-Y and Tri-Hi-Y friend, Thomas Brown from Oakland, who was also a student at the University of Mississippi. Hi-Y and Tri-Hi-Y was the negro branch of the YMCA school program. It was sponsored by schools and allowed us to attend district and state events and develop oratorical and leadership skills. The friendships, associations, competitions and skills we developed helped many black students in Mississippi excel in college and in our careers. For many of us this was the only socialization with mul-



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tiples outside of our hometown communities.

Thomas told me he had finished Northwest Junior College in Senatobia and was married to Louise. He and I loved, worked with and hung out around the little one room store run by our UM black student advisor, the late Reverend Wayne Johnson, called the Co-op. I don't know if Thomas was preaching then or thinking about it. Next thing I knew he had gotten his undergraduate degree and headed to Atlanta to seminary.

Fast forward to the early eighties and somehow Thomas and I reconnected by phone, discovering we were both in Georgia and living in the same county. We ended up in the same area, and our sons attended the same high school. That is when I got to know Louise a little better. By then she was a highly respected teacher with a doctorate in education, and she and Thomas were very involved in the parents' associ-



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

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ation – all this in addition to rearing a highly recruited footballer headed to the University of Georgia and then to the NFL. Thomas, an established preacher in the Christian Methodist Episcopal church and the dean of Phillips School of Theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center, asked me to help with a conference. It was there that I observed Louise in her role as the wife of a dean and a pastor.

And now my enlightenment, as I call it, on the life of Louise Baker Brown. Walls and Lura Baker gave birth to Louise on October 3, 1952 in Coffeeville, the fourth of their seven children.

They lived about four miles from downtown on 80 acres of land inherited from the Baker grandfather. Of the seven siblings, five are still living, and her brother, Bobby, resides at the original homestead. The family lived out of their garden and raised livestock. Both parents could read and write but had little formal education beyond the third or fourth grade. Mrs. Baker is known as one of the best cooks who ever worked at the Yalobusha County Hospital. She now resides there in the nursing facility.

Though the Bakers did not grow cotton, they earned money picking for other folks. "I could pick 200 pounds," Louise said. "I am very competitive when I do something, I want to be the best. Coupled with the fact that I was getting paid." Mr. Baker worked as a laborer for 20-plus years in soil conservation around Enid Dam. Prior to that he worked for a few weeks at plant in Grenada and discovered he could not tolerate being in an enclosed space. Then he tried a local chicken plant for a brief stint, but that did not last long. And from that day forward he never ate another piece of chicken.

As Louise and I talked, we soon realized the similarities in our life stories. We both graduated in the last class from the all black high schools in 1970. She graduated from Central High School as valedictorian of her class. Just as I did after graduation, we both set out to find jobs in the big city. Louise went to Chicago and worked to earn the money that she needed for tuition at Northwest Junior College. I went to Detroit with no plan of returning, had zero luck job hunting, came back and went to college with nothing.

Louise had earned \$800 that summer but needed \$812 for tuition at Northwest. With tears in her eyes now, she recalls telling her dad the morning she was leaving for college that she needed \$12. "It never occurred to me that I should ask for more," she laughs. "I thought all I needed was the 12 dollars." She chokes up again at her dad's response. He told her that he didn't have the money, but perhaps seeing the disappointment on her face – even if he didn't understand the importance of college – he said he would borrow the money. Louise said from that day until the day he died, she never asked her father for another dime, and she made sure that he never wanted for anything.

Many of us avoided asking our parents for money while in college because we knew they simply did not have it. Nor did they really understand the costs of college. This poverty and deprivation forced us into an independence, a drive and the determination to be self-sufficient and successful. Years later, Louise would jokingly say to her dad many times that the 12-dollar investment in her was the best investment he ever made.

At Northwest Louise worked at the snack bar and lived on campus. "I learned to trust in God at an early age and was determined to get an education and never expected a handout" she said. She credits her Central teachers, especially Monroe Walton, for inspiring her love of science

and education. Even though the books were outdated, and teachers had to use their personal funds to supplement supplies, time and time again those teachers proudly told her and her classmates that they were going to be



Bishop Thomas Brown and Dr. Louise Baker Brown.



Lura Baker is the mother of seven children, including Dr. Louise Baker Brown

somebody. But in her college classrooms Louise realized she and her Central schoolmates had received an education that was inferior to her fellow students. Her black roommate from Patton Lane High in Batesville was more advanced and often helped her understand concepts that she had never been taught.

All the schools in Yalobusha County had integrated in some fashion by the fall of 1970, and while Louise does not recall any of the strife associated with school integration, she believes that the transition was detrimental to her three younger siblings and many other black students who, for whatever reasons, dropped out of the new school by 10th or 11th grade. I cannot help but believe that administrators showed a distinct lack of care and concern for the marginal students then as well as today.

Louise graduated from Northwest Junior College with an Associate Degree. In July 1972, she married Thomas Louis Brown. They had met in high school at a Social Elite event. This was a club established by black women to mentor young girls. Thomas had driven his mom to the meeting in Charleston and participated in the session. When he said he wanted to be a doctor, Louise was intrigued. But they didn't see each other again until their paths crossed at Northwest.

When Thomas asked her to marry him, he also told her that he had been called to ministry. "I was scared because I had no idea how to be a preacher's wife," Louise admitted. "I was raised in the Baptist church and our attendance was infrequent. I knew this was a serious commitment – he would have people's lives in his hands. I wanted to know if he was sure. He told me that he did not have any expectations of me and assured me that he would support my educational goals. So, I took a chance, and he kept his word."

Both enrolled at the University of Mississippi where Louise completed her junior year and Thomas graduated. They moved to Atlanta, and Thomas attended Phillips School of Theology at the International Theological Center. Louise enrolled at Spelman College, graduating in 1974 with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. She worked for the Atlanta Police Department for a year as a police officer. In 1978, Louise completed her Master of Education from Columbus State University, Columbus, Georgia. Her daughter, Nicole, was born in 1979 (a son, Thomas, would come seven years later), and even as a new mother, she supported her husband in his pastoral assignments. Louise taught high school social studies in Talbot County for four years and was named Talbot County Teacher of the Year in 1980. The couple returned to Atlanta in 1982, and Louise resumed her teaching career with the DeKalb County School System.

In 1990 Louise was named DeKalb County Teacher of the Year. She earned her Specialist of Education in 1994 from the University of West Georgia, in Carrollton. In 1998, she became an Instructor Coordinator with DeKalb County Schools working on a team supporting middle and high school educators. She completed her Educational Leadership Certification in 2000 from the University of West Georgia and earned a Doctor of Education degree from Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida in November 2006. Louise retired in 2007 after 30 years as an educator.

Louise continues to be active in the work and mission of the CME Church. She has joined Thomas in conducting marriage retreat workshops in several Episcopal Districts. As a highly respected couple, they have set a strong example for many in and outside of their denomination. For 12 years – from 2006 to 2018 - she and Thomas were based in Jackson, assigned to the Fourth Episcopal District covering Louisiana and Mississippi. She has received awards and numerous accolades for her leadership and work in the church and greater communities, specifically in Christian education.

In 2019 the couple moved back to Atlanta. Louise now serves alongside Thomas, the bishop in the Sixth Episcopal District, which covers the state of Georgia. Many of the pastors they supervise were students under Thomas when he served as dean of the Phillips seminary, Louise often acting as mom, friend, mentor and advisor to any who needed the support while away from home. Their work in the CME Church has sent them to Mexico, Jamaica, Brazil, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and London. Currently, she leads the Ministers' Spouses, implementing training, teaching and support. And she is also a member of the Power of Good News CME Church in Lithonia.



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Just like my family Louise, her mother and her siblings have held on to their portion of the 80-acre Baker Farm. When I asked her about experiencing discrimination in Coffeeville, she said she believed that "land ownership protected us in a way. White men often came by trying to buy our property or wanting to hunt and my dad always stood his ground. We children were sheltered from a lot."

Of life challenges, Louise says that motherhood was much harder than teaching – which was easy by comparison. She did not want her children to be deprived. It always surprised her to hear some folks say they did not realize they were poor until they got to college. "I am not sure what took them so long," Louise said. "We were never hungry, but I saw early on how much we did without." Education became and remained a priority. When her son, Thomas, played football at UGA, she was concerned about the white environment but stressed to him that above all, he would get his degree. She knew everyone on the academic support team for the athletes and stayed on top of her son's progress. Thomas graduated, went on to the NFL and is now coaching on the collegiate level.

In addition to being the proud mother of Charisa Nicole Jefferson and Thomas, Jr., Louise loves her role of grandmother to six grandchildren: Ariel Moriah, Kingston Albert and Alana Joel Jefferson, and Orlando Thomas, Tyson Louis and Judah Elizah Brown.

All this is in keeping with her commitment to helping young folks when she was teaching. Louise told her students to expect to succeed. "Don't take low achievement as something we aspire to here" was her mantra. She had her students sign contracts to aim for an A or B in her classes. Anything less than a C in her view meant that the stu-

dent was not going to even try to do well in the class. Her doctoral dissertation focused on preparing students for standardized testing because she believed that most black students needed assistance. She developed a program to provide noontime and after school tutoring to help them.

Louise has embraced the church with the same commitment she gave to education. She is clear-eyed about the present challenges. "It is the effort required to be relevant to our time without looking like the world. I didn't grow up in the church, but it was always important to me. Church is not a real concern or priority like it used to be. We see so many people who do not think church is relevant. Our culture is now saying that church is not important. As blacks we cannot forget where we came from. We must assume some responsibility for each other. We have gotten away from that – if we are okay - we don't think about others. Sunday is just like any other day, perpetuated by tv talk show hosts and announcers who talk about everything except what they do on Sunday. There are so many who have never been in a church and feel there is no need. Those of us who are in ministry must keep presenting the more excellent way."

Proverbs 31:25- She is clothed with strength and dignity as she laughs without fear of the future.

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