

Growing up when things were black and white

BY KERRI L. MCFALLS
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MORGANTON — It was her first day of fifth grade and Ruth Roseboro was nervous.

She got up early that morning, put on her favorite dress and fixed her hair her favorite way.

She had to make a good first impression.

Her family had moved across town and she was going to a new school — Forest Hill Elementary.

And while she made her walk to school that morning, she wondered what it would be like.

Was she going to like her teacher? Would she be able to make new friends?

Would they accept her?

"Can I help you?" Roseboro recalls asking the girl who had been following her around the school halls.

"I'm just looking for your tail," the girl told Roseboro. "Y'all are like monkeys. Don't you have a tail?"

See, Roseboro was different than most of her classmates.

She is black.

Today, Roseboro doesn't even remember the name of the young girl who taunted her, but she won't forget what it was like being one of the first black students at her school or what it felt like growing up during the heat of the civil rights movement.

FIRST TRIP TO TOWN

"We were going to Winn-Dixie," Roseboro said. The grocery store was located on the corner of Avery Avenue and North Green Street.

"I was only 7 or 8 years old."

As a child, Roseboro never had a reason to go into town. Growing up on East Union Street, she lived just a few blocks from the neighborhood store and beauty shop.

And though she was only a few blocks away, downtown Morganton was, to her, a whole other world.

"Everything was right there in our neighborhood," she said. "It was like we lived in our own little world. Town was for the grown-ups."

Before Roseboro made the walk to town, her mother sat her down to have a talk.



Roseboro

"She told me there were some places I could and couldn't go and some things I couldn't do," Roseboro said. "She told me to stay right with her."

And she stayed — right by her mother's side.

"It was literally like New York for me," Roseboro said. "I was amazed."

But everything about downtown Morganton wasn't glamorous.

"Some of my first memories were the water fountains," Roseboro said. "I remember that they were marked 'white only' and 'colored only.' It made me not want to drink at all, no matter how hot it was."

Ruth found out that she couldn't use the downtown bathrooms, either.

The bathroom for the "colored" people was under the old jail on Meeting Street.

"They were dark, damp and smelled horrible," Roseboro said.

"You used the bathroom before you came into town."

MARCH THROUGH TOWN

By the time Roseboro started at Morganton High School, making friends was the least of her worries.

She had been accepted by most of her classmates, but some things still bothered her.

School administrators discovered what the black athletes could offer the sports teams and encouraged them to participate, Roseboro said,

but other extracurricular activities weren't as easy to join.

Though it wasn't a written rule, blacks were kept out of chorus or cheerleading, Roseboro said.

Frustrations led to civil marches and protests.

"We shall overcome," were the words she wrote on her civil rights protest sign that she marched with from Morganton High School, located on College Street, to the Burke County Courthouse.

"We did it every day," Roseboro said. "We went right through the middle of town. After marching from (the high school) we would meet at Slades Chapel and walk to the Board of Education on Avery Avenue. There was about 40 to 50 of us."

Roseboro became one of the first black cheerleaders for Morganton High School.

GOING TO GRANDMA'S HOUSE

But the desegregation of public restrooms and schools was only half of the battle.

Roseboro had an even bigger monster to understand — racism.

When Roseboro's mother packed up her children and moved her family across town from East Union Street to Concord Street, they were separated from their grandmother.

And though her family still didn't have a car, her mother was insistent about them visiting their grandmother every day. The family made the trip on foot; a trip that wasn't always pleasant.

People yelled racial obscenities at the family and threw things at them.

"We got egged a couple of times," Roseboro said. "It was just some people driving by. We hadn't done anything wrong."

SHIELDED BY PRAYER

"My mother was a praying woman and I know she was praying for our safety," Roseboro said. "We were kids living during this time and I know it could have been worse."

As a child, or an adult, Roseboro has never understood how someone could be filled with so much hate. "I was never taught prejudice or disrespect for another human be-

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RUTH ROSEBORO
WILDCATS COACH

ing," Roseboro said. "My mother had no reason to teach me that. My mother never taught me that there was a difference and she never taught me to look down on anyone. "My mother and grandmother were very inspirational to me," Roseboro said. "I have never met a more solid group of women than the women in my family."

It was the prayer Roseboro's mother instilled in her as a young girl that she still carries with her.

"Ruth is a very, very faithful woman," said the Rev. Ronald Knight of Gaston Chapel A.M.E. Church, where Roseboro attends. "She comes from family where prayer was a way of life. It was the way she was raised. She grew up in that, so it was very easy for her to just adopt that way of life. She couldn't help but follow it."

Roseboro's involvement in her church has helped bridge its ministry into the community.

"It is not always what you say, but what you do," Knight said. "And Ruth is a very helpful person. She takes her church out to the community, and that's what we need to do, bring Christ to the community. She takes it to the people."

KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE

"I can't be angry," Roseboro said. As she looks at her children, and their children, she can breathe out a

sigh of relief.

Roseboro has already climbed her mountain, but she knows as she sits atop it, she can see all the other mountains that need to be conquered.

"I'm just like Martin Luther King. I have a dream," Roseboro said. "I dream that color, religion and gender won't make a difference and that we all work together for the better of us all."

Her daughter, Shante Roseboro, knows growing up wasn't easy for her mother but thinks she did it with as much class as possible.

"I don't think anything was easy for her at all," Shante Roseboro said.

"She always had to work harder than anyone else. It was hard growing up as a human being when you are treated like a dog and I never knew how she dealt with racism so closely until a few months ago. But she is strong and dedicated."

Roseboro tries to live as an example for young women of all races by living out her dream of peace.

"People can love money, love, cars or anything else but another human being," Roseboro said.

"If everybody truly has the love of Jesus Christ in them, then there wouldn't be war because you would love everyone. You have to have love," Roseboro said.

And though she knows her dream of peace is far-fetched, Roseboro never loses sight of it.

"She puts her heart into it and she doesn't give up," Knight said. "She is always doing for others, and that's what she does. She's a good person who tries hard to help. She'll do for anyone."

Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Roseboro has seen a lot of changes, but she knows for her dream to come true, more changes are yet to come.

"We've come a long way but we still have a long way to go," Roseboro said.

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Travel briefs

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