

● McBrayer, Sharon. "Seven Mothers Shared One Goal: a Better Education." The News Herald, 6 March, 2005. pp. 1, 11.

## Seven mothers shared one goal: a better education

BY SHARON MCBRAYER  
THE NEWS HERALD

**MORGANTON** — Segregation in America, specifically the South, was long a hotbed of resentment on one side and distrust and hate on the other.

And Burke County was no different in 1964 when black students and white students in Morganton started going to school together.

The Rev. W. Flemon McIntosh said long hours of planning and seven determined mothers helped make the transition a bit smoother in Burke County compared to other parts of the country.

Those seven determined mothers wanted one thing: an equal education for their children.

Willette Chambers, Laura Thomas,

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**Willette Chambers, left, and Lucille Rutherford, were two of seven mothers who helped integrate Morganton city schools in 1964. The women called themselves the West Concord Mothers.**

# INTEGRATION: Seven mothers shared the same goal of giving their children a better education

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Lucille Rutherford, Mildred Largent, Annie J. Hicks, Ruth Forney and Rose Johnson called themselves the West Concord Mothers because they all lived on West Concord Street. Chambers, Thomas and Rutherford are the only ones still living.

Before integration their children attended schools for black students, including Olive Hill High School and Mt. View Elementary School.

But their education was limited and they wanted the opportunity to take more classes. At Olive Hill, for example, typing and shorthand were not offered. To compensate, the alumni from Olive Hill and the PTA purchased tables and typewriters for the class and McIntosh taught it after school.

The first stop for the mothers on the road to getting their children into equal schools was to go to the school board. The hope for their children's future was foremost in their minds.

"We said we wanted a better education for our children," Chambers said.

There were three school systems in Burke County at the time. Morganton city schools, Glen Alpine schools and the Burke County schools. All black high school students had to attend Olive Hill High School, even if they lived in other parts of the county.

## Issues

A new elementary school for black students was built in 1967 in the Mt. View area of Morgan-

ton. The mothers said school officials tried to sell them on the fact that the school was a new facility and they should be happy about their children going there.

But they wanted their kids to go to Forest Hill Elementary School - a school for white students. It was closer to West Concord Street, and having to transport their children across town to another school was not only a logistical problem, but a safety concern as well as there were no buses for the black children.

The mother's felt the distance between their homes and Mt. View was too far for the children to walk, so they hired a taxi driver to take their children to school each day, Chambers said.

But that was a problem because the driver would overload the car. The mother's felt the situation was an accident waiting to happen.

## The Plan

In the spring of 1964 McIntosh was a teacher and coach at Olive Hill High School.

"I was asked by a board member if I feared being fired because of integration," McIntosh said. "My answer was no, because I was trained in the nation's better colleges and I felt like I was just as qualified as any white teachers. Plus, there was a shortage of white teachers and they had to have somebody to teach the children."

Though he risked losing his job, he opened his basement to the women so they could meet and plan the desegregation of Morganton city schools. The

women would go to his home at night and McIntosh would coach them on how to approach school officials, Chambers said.

McIntosh wanted the women to be able to make a unified statement to the school board that stated why they wanted to attend the other schools.

## Paper work

After going to a school board meeting, the women were told to go see a lawyer, Alvin Berry, who would help them fill out the necessary paperwork for the children to be transferred, Chambers said.

McIntosh said several students were transferred before they closed Olive Hill.

"The school board did a decent job in resolving the problem in that they provided the leadership and atmosphere for these children to be enrolled in an orderly manner," McIntosh.

## Confrontations

Once the black and white students started attending the same schools, the mothers remember parents of white students lining the sidewalks and sitting in their cars at the schools, yelling that they didn't want black students in the schools.

"We were heckled," Chambers said. "They was chanting and singing, 'We don't want (them) in there.'"

McIntosh said the slurs shouted at some of the schools were isolated incidents.

He said it was not as big of an issue as it was in other communities.

# INTEGRATION: Seven mothers shared the same goal of giving their children a better education

The general thought was women were less likely to be on the receiving end of threats. That's why the black community sent the mothers in to help integrate the schools. But this did not come without the full support of the men backing them up.

Day after day, the mothers

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**WILLITTE CHAMBERS**  
WEST CONCORD MOTHER

walked their children to school and made sure they were safe.

"I took my children to school for about three days until things got settled," Chambers said.

The West Concord Mothers escorted black children to the different schools.

Chambers remembers going to Morganton Junior High School, walking up the steps and having a white woman trip her, causing her to fall on her knees.

The taunting and threats didn't end at the school house doors.

Rutherford said some of the children had pages torn out of their school books, while some had their coats thrown into toi-

lets and their clothes torn. There were also confrontations between the black and white students.

The mothers warned their children to keep their guard up and never eat or drink anything someone gave them.

"You never did feel relaxed and relieved," Chambers said.

Black families that year endured having crosses burned in their yards and received telephone threats.

McIntosh was among those threatened.

"School officials played a major role in this by publically asking the parents to refrain from the heckling and abuse, and that they would punish anybody who interrupted the education process," McIntosh said.

After about 30 days, everything had settled down, he said.

In 1965, when they closed Olive Hill High School, it was apparent that the system had adopted integration. So all of the students from Glen Alpine and other parts of the county had to go to the schools in their districts, McIntosh said.

## Victory

"The reason we integrated schools was a better education," Rutherford said.

Before integration, about the only jobs for black women without a college education was domestic work, Rutherford said.

"The reason we integrated the schools was because when we got out of school the only thing we could do was take care of white people's children," Rutherford said.

Times have changed for black students now.

"We accomplished what we went after," Rutherford said. "It was rough. It wasn't easy but we enjoyed it. It was something we went after. I feel like we have won. The children have to go forward."

Rutherford added, "We paved the road, now they have to travel it."

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