

McGimpsey, Erma. "Mildred Largent." Heroes, Heroines & Headliners: The Legends of Burke County, 2006, pp. 57-58. Advertising supplement published by The News-Herald of Morganton, NC.

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Mildred Largent

By Erma McGimpsey

Whenever I think of Mildred O'Neil Largent, Daisy Bates, the catalyst for the "Little Rock Nine" comes to mind.

I am not certain if it is the resemblance in physical statue or the sheer determination of both women committed to the causes of freedom and equal opportunity for all.

Bates was a pivotal figure in seminal moments of the civil rights movement as publisher and journalist. She was an advocate on a larger scale and like Largent endured many hardships early in life. She worked diligently as the leader of the state conferences of NAACP branches in Arkansas. She became advisor and protector of the "Little Rock Nine," the first black students to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Ark.

Mildred was the first woman president of the Morganton Chapter NAACP, assuming this office in 1992, after serving as secretary for 13 years.

She was the leader of Burke Citizens in a movement for better employment in industry and integration in the local public schools. She, along with a group of neighborhood parents, later became known as the "Big Seven" were instrumental in getting their children enrolled in the schools closer to their homes.

Their children had to walk all the way across the city in order to get to Mountain View Elementary School. The parents were concerned about the safety of their small children walking across town when there were elementary schools closer to them.

The Big Seven parents group made their appeal to the local school board and discussed their concerns. A temporary solution was formulated by providing bus transportation for the students.

Further negotiations with the local school board in 1963 resulted in the area students being enrolled in the Forest Hill Elementary, Morganton Junior High and Morganton High schools.

The Olive Hill High School was closed in 1965. Prior to this, all black high school students in



Burke County attended Olive Hill High School, which was located on the corner of West Concord and New streets.

Largent and her husband Thomas Largent Jr., had seven girls in seven years. She grew up with her girls and became a young grandmother at 36.

When Largent was 35 years old, she realized her life long dream. In 1965 she received her GED, and then attended Western Piedmont Community College. She attended Housing and Property Management at Winston-Salem State University, Shaw University and the University of North Carolina at Asheville and Chapel Hill.

In 1966, Largent became an employee of the Morganton Housing Authority, working her way up through the ranks over the years beginning as relocation officer, site office manager, deputy director, acting director, social service director

and property and housing manager.

She was afforded many opportunities to serve, as she was asked to serve on almost every city and county board in Morganton and Burke County. These include the Burke County Cultural Diversity Task Force, the Advisory Committee for the Aging, the Morganton Human Relations Committee, the Morganton Parent-Teacher Association Board, the Burke County Voter's Right Committee, the American Red Cross Blood Services Advisory Committee, the Repay Committee of Morganton, Hickory and Lenoir.

Largent also served as a delegate to the North Carolina White House Conference of the Aging in Raleigh. In May 1996, she was a delegate to the 11th National Conference on Preventing Crime in the Black Community, held in Orlando, Fla. at the office of Attorney General Bob Butterworth.

Largent also was an active member of Slades Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church. She served as chairperson of the Trustee Board and Building Committee. She was on the Christian Board of Education and a member of the Twenty Century Club. She was a life member of the Missionary Department.

Her longtime neighbor and niece, Rosetta Ferguson says, "Aunt Mildred was truly one of the strongest women I've had the pleasure of knowing. She was my spiritual mother as well as my friend. Often times, you would see her sitting on the porch, reading the Bible."

Rosetta along with other family members had the opportunity to travel with Largent across country for two weeks, touring the United States from North Carolina to California. While in California, the group auditioned for the television show "Family Feud" and won defeating a family from Alabama.

When they were called back to appear, one person could not afford to make the trip and thus they missed their 30 minutes of national television

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fame. The stipulation was all must return unless a member had died.

Largent had many hobbies and enjoyed all of them. There was fishing, gardening, reading, working puzzles, playing the piano for relaxation, sports of all kinds and cooking. She owned a catering service for five years in the 1980s. She enjoyed traveling immensely and had hoped to visit Australia.

Her daughter Patricia L. Boyd lives in Cincinnati, Ohio; Mildred L. Conley lives in Lenoir; Sarah Largent lives in Los Angeles, Calif.; Sandra L. Bristol and Wanda L. Forney live in Morganton. Tommie Lou is deceased. Kelly, the granddaughter raised by Largent, lives in Morganton.

When Kelly was in grade school, she interviewed her grandmother. Mildred gave her the following advice: "Work hard in school and be the best in whatever you do. Accept and practice self-discipline and stay close to God. I believe that he will

never place more on you than you can bear.

"Learn to accept disappointment and change the things that you canchange and accept those things you can not change.

"Never let your friends persuade you to do those things that you know in your heart is wrong.

"Never do drugs of any sort.

"Love life and tell others that you don't need drugs that you are high on life. Love God first, self second and others as you want to be loved.

"Do not let anyone or anything take your self-esteem. Please remember that beauty comes from your soul, not from make-up and always be true to yourself."

On Sunday, Feb. 9, 1997, Largent was suddenly stricken with a brain aneurism while preparing to perform a program at her church. She died on Friday, Feb. 14, 1997.

Despite life's hurdles, Largent preserved and left a lasting legacy for generations yet unborn.

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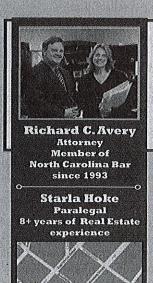
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