

Nelson Merry's impact

School spirit is still alive among school's former students

BY GAYLE PAGE
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Nelson Merry School for African Americans remains an icon - a place remembered and revered by the people who attended there.

Before desegregation, it was the only school for black children in Jefferson County, and afterward, many students who loved the school stayed on rather than transferring to other city schools. Their proud memories have never changed.

Students who received their schooling at Nelson Merry are like family rather than simply individuals with an educational experience in common. Nelson Merry, until it closed its doors in 1966, was the only African American elementary through high school institute of learning in the county, and young people from all the small outlying school decided to hold an event to raise money to help build their new gymnasium. Everyone was excited because it was to be an event shrouded in secrecy, and the organizers called it "The Devil's Funeral."

The day of the event finally came and students were impatiently waiting to attend this scary "funeral" for which the school had borrowed a casket from a local undertaker. Admission was paid at the door and only one student at a time was permitted to view "the devil" lying in his coffin. They were also sworn to secrecy not to describe their experience to someone who had not yet entered the dismal

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funeral chamber. Those waiting in line were puzzled by the knowing grins the viewers tried to conceal when coming out. What had they seen?

Julia said the casket had been set up with a full length mirror propped on a pillow inside, so that the viewer got a clear look at his or her own face. It caused quite a bit of giggling, while others seemed to understand the deeper meaning, which was the objective of the mock play written by Mrs. P. and J. Anthony Dean.

Julia contributed this story to become part of a collection of hometown tales from East Tennessee called *Moonshine and Mountaintops*.

Taliaferro, like many of her friends and family, is proud of her heritage and of the school from which many of them graduated. Julia is always the first one to help plan and organize events that celebrate African American history and the role that Jefferson County residents played in it.

ing communities attended there, helping to know each other well and making lifelong friends.

The school was founded April 5, 1890, and was named for the Reverend Nelson Merry, a former Kentucky slave and pioneer Baptist preacher.

Julia Taliaferro of Jefferson City delights in collecting artifacts, books and histories. She is always ready to take part in helping to plan and coordinate events that commemorate African American history and achievements. She shares her large collection of photographs and school yearbooks during Black History Month each year, and she encourages friends to participate and contribute whatever keepsakes or memorabilia they have to share, as well.

Julia started school at Nelson Merry in 1946, ultimately gradu-

ating in 1959. Nelson Merry was the only black school in Jefferson County that went from first grade to twelfth grade. She was blessed to live in a nearby neighborhood, while other young students of color had to be bused from farms and communities on the far fringes of the county.

Despite sometimes being obligated to instruct from hand-me-down textbooks, Julia says Nelson Merry teachers always provided an excellent level of education to their students. Some graduates even believe Nelson Merry's high school curriculum was oriented toward college preparatory. Many African Americans in the community who attended Nelson Merry have gone on to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees from fine universities.

A few have even become quite famous, like Mark Dean, a Universi-

ty of Tennessee graduate who is an American inventor and a computer engineer. He was the chief engineer of the 12-person team that designed the original IBM personal computer (PC) in the early '80s.

And then there was Mose Reliford, a well-known and highly-respected teacher and football coach at Jefferson County High School. He stayed at Nelson Merry even after desegregation until his school closed in 1966.

Looking back, Julia believes most students at Nelson Merry had a lot of school spirit. Pride in their school was strong, and friendships were made that have lasted through distance and time. The school colors were orange and black, and sports teams wore them proudly.

"We were like a big family," she said.

Julia recalls that one time the



This elaborate photo collage was created by Julia Taliaferro. Nelson Merry School was well known for their winning football and basketball teams. Since she was always the tallest in her class, she was a star for the girls' basketball team.

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