

Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: The Project continues Annie Givens And Joann Bratton: Neighbors With A Special Bond

In Marian Wright Edelman's book *Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors*, published in 1999, the New York Times bestselling author shares stories from her life at the center of the century's most dramatic civil rights struggles. She was the first and only black female lawyer in Mississippi in the 1960s. In this book she pays tribute to the outstanding personal mentors who impacted her life: Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, Fannie Lou Hamer, Medgar Evers, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, Unita Blackwell and many others. Her life is what this girl and possibly every black girl in the South longed to live, and I love how she has shared it in this book.

While I have several take-aways from *Lanterns*, I quickly relate it to this Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County Project (BWOYC) because she writes about the women she described as community elders – co-parents and mentors in Bennettsville, South Carolina who influenced her life, an extraordinary life.

Marian also noted with appreciation observations from Andrew Young, the former US ambassador to the United Nations, former Atlanta mayor, and civil rights advocate: "God has ways of acting anonymously" - to set the stage for the workings of His Justice. Marian echoes those thoughts: "God chooses the actors, the times, the places, sets the stage, lifts the curtain, and begins the drama," she writes, and continues with this charge: "Our task is to be ready to play our parts and to do the work God has assigned us, without anxiety, according to strengths and gifts we are given."

Can you – can we – answer Edelman's charge affirmatively? Have we completed or achieved this task? If not, do we yet have time? Are we currently using our gifts and talents to

make a difference in someone's life? What can we do to bridge the racial divide permeating our country and our communities today? What can we do to alleviate poverty and ensure adequate health care? What can we do to improve the image of Mississippi? Does it matter? Are we content? Are we discouraged or simply just don't care?

As 2019 approaches can we commit to doing something positive to make a difference, if just for a neighbor next door? The story of the latest actor in this BWOYC Project suggests Mississippi at its best. Mrs. Joann Bratton, now 85 years old, had left a voice mail for me on Thursday, November 8, telling me she had read my columns and wanted to recommend a woman if she was not already in my plan.

Mrs. Bratton explained that she lived in Water Valley for a couple of years and had the most wonderful neighbor, Mrs. Annie Givens. Mrs. Bratton now resides in Oxford and told me it would be such a loss if Mrs. Givens was not included in this project.

"You know I am white," Mrs. Bratton said.

"I know," I replied. "I don't know how you know but that's okay," she said.

And I just laughed. Mrs. Bratton began to tell me about Mrs. Givens, who lived across the street from her on Wagner Street.

One day while she was away from home a severe storm arose, and she worried because she had left her windows open. When she returned, she found that Mrs. Givens had come over and was able to close all the windows – a testament to the comfort between the Brattons and the Givens. My family lived on the same route further out, where later the street was named Wagner Extended. If memory serves it was not that unusual in Water



By Dottie Chapman Reed

Reed is a native of Water Valley and graduated from Davidson High School in 1970. She has launched 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.

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Valley to find a few black families sprinkled in white neighborhoods closer to downtown. This wasn't the case in every neighborhood – and unlike most towns in Mississippi, thankfully, no harm came to Mrs. Givens. I know she was a very active member of Everdale Baptist Church. My mother and I walked past her house on our way home, many, many times stopping to get water, or to watch as she worked in her flower garden. Her facial expression always said to me, "Tell me what you are going to be, what are you doing to better yourself."

Then Mrs. Bratton explained how her little daughter, Dawn, would go across the street to Mrs. Givens' house and Mrs. Givens would always check to see if she had permission to come over. When other white neighbors mentioned that Mrs. Givens was involved in the NAACP, Mrs. Bratton had a ready reply: "If I were black, I would be also."

She believes that Mrs. Givens' late husband was a preacher at a local Baptist church.

When I asked Mrs. Bratton if she would write more about her memories of Mrs. Givens, she explained that she had just finished writing her brother's obituary and her husband is in hospice. My heart breaks for her, and I expressed my sympathy and concern. She also reminded me that she is 85 years old and her memory is not 100 percent.

I told her that I knew Mrs. Givens, and she is definitely on my list of approximately 100 women, most from Water Valley, whose contributions to the black community I would like to learn more about.

While I am researching, I would love to hear from anyone who has more information about Mrs. Annie Givens. I know she was a very active member of Everdale Baptist Church. My mother and I walked past her house on our way home, many, many times stopping to get water, or to watch as she worked in her flower garden. Her facial expression always said to me, "Tell me what you are going to be, what are you doing to better yourself."

She pushed young folks to the highest standards, and I admit that I often tried to avoid her on the street or whenever I saw her at her church! I knew she would expect a full report on my grades, my activities and my plans. And for this alone she made the list.

My high school classmate, Carolyn Wright, whom you heard from in the Rosa Wright story, was really the first to recommend Mrs. Givens. Carolyn told me when she arrived for church one Sunday and found her name listed to serve during worship that morning, she knew Mrs. Givens had volunteered her. Mrs. Givens was one of the Youth Directors at Everdale Baptist Church. So more to come about her, I hope.

Alas, my mind goes back to Mrs. Bratton. While she is mourning the loss of her brother and caring for, and witnessing her husband's decline, she is nonetheless thinking of someone else. We agree to talk later, and I proceed.

Water Valley High School English teacher Dexter Ross (center) was named Teacher of the Year for Water Valley School District. Ross teaches 8th grade English and coaches junior high basketball.

"We take this opportunity to thank Coach Ross for his contribution to our school. The impact he has had on our students' lives, and even the future of the community itself, is indeed immeasurable," reporter WVHS Principal Drew Pitcock states.

With Ross are Pitcock (left) and school board president Pierce Epes.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

VFW Schedules Bingo, Dance

Activities at VFW Post 4100 this weekend will include bingo on Friday night, Dec. 14. Doors will open at 5 p.m. and play will begin at 7. Providing music on Saturday night, Dec. 15, will be the Jeff Sexton Band. They will take the stage from 8 p.m. to midnight. Post 4100's Home is located at 11535 Highway 315, west of Water Valley.

Yalobusha Patriots Sponsor Christmas Luncheon For Vets

The Yalobusha Patriots will sponsor a Christmas luncheon in the Railroad Museum Lion's Club Building on Dec. 22 from noon to 2 p.m. to honor local veterans. Yalobusha Patriots are a unique group of volunteers who sponsor events to honor all veterans. The wives, widows, or special friend of veterans are also encouraged to attend the event which includes entertainment after the meal.

"Come, fellowships with us in the museum on Saturday, December 22. We thank the Lions Club for the use of their building for our luncheon," invites the group.

Santa Will Visit Dream Riders Clubhouse

Dream Riders Biking for Children will have Santa Claus at their Clubhouse on December 15, from noon until 3 p.m. for kids to talk to Santa. The clubhouse is located at 16480 Mississippi Street (the old American Legion Building) in Coffeeville. The Dream Riders look forward to seeing everyone at this event.

York Rite Meeting Is Dec. 20

Due to the Christmas Holidays, Water Valley York Rite Bodies have rescheduled their meeting for Thursday, December 20, in the Masonic Temple on Champion Circle. Members are reminded that the meeting time has been changed to 7 p.m. during standard time. The meeting will be in the Council. A light meal will be served following the meeting.

Historical Society Will Have Christmas Music, Food At Meeting

The Yalobusha County Historical Society will meet Thursday, December 20, at 2 p.m. in its headquarters, the former Coffeeville Presbyterian Church, for its Christmas program. The Gospel Revival musical group will perform Christmas music and refreshments will be served afterwards. Visitors are welcome to attend.

Compassion Will Distribute Food On Second And Third Thursdays

Compassion Food Ministry's distribution dates for December will be different than usual due to Christmas holidays. Distributions days will be Thursday, Dec. 13, from 9:30-11 a.m., and Thursday, Dec. 20, 9:30-11 a.m. Registration may be done before 9:30 a.m. as usual.

School Trustees Schedule Board Meeting

The Water Valley School District Board of Trustees have scheduled a school board meeting on Monday, Dec. 17, at 6:30 p.m. in the central office. The public is invited to attend.

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