

MARY ELLEN HENDERSON BIOGRAPHY

MARY ELLEN 'NELLIE' HENDERSON:

A LIFE OF MAKING DIFFERENCES, BIG AND SMALL

BY DARIEN BATES - FALLS CHURCH NEWS PRESS

In 1910 Mary Ellen Meriwether married E.B. Henderson and moved to the City of Falls Church. Both young and educated, the couple built a house on what is now S. Maple Street and began to turn it into a home, complete with children and livestock. But as the new Mrs. Henderson settled into the cozy confines of the rural township, outside the bustle of D.C. she could hardly have expected that with the start of a new life, she was also going to lead multiple generations of people to change their small part of the world.

Last month the school board for the City of Falls Church decided by a 4-3 vote to name its new middle school, now under construction and expected to be finished next fall, for Mary Ellen Henderson, in honor of her tireless efforts to bring equality to a segregated school system and community.

During the Jan. 25 meeting, school board members advocating the Henderson school name sang the praises of "Miss Nellie," as she was known by her students. They pointed to her history of activism and involvement as the grounds for their decision. They also recognized her work as simply a teacher, a difficult and often thankless job she worked for over 30 years, though one that impacted her students so profoundly, the effects still resonate to this day.

Almost immediately upon moving into the City, Miss Nellie became a strident voice for the rights of African Americans. In 1912 Falls Church attempted to pass an ordinance to limit the areas in which black people could live, codifying a segregated township.

Immediately, Mrs. and Mr. Henderson helped form the Colored Citizen's Protective League (CCPL), a group that brought together the African American people of Falls Church to collectively speak out against the ordinance. The group was able to create enough of an outcry against the measure that although it was enacted, it was never enforced. Ironically, it languished largely forgotten on the books and was not officially removed until February 1999.

The fight for black home ownership rights was just the first of many for Mrs. Henderson. Eventually, the CCPL was incorporated into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), becoming that organization's first rural chapter.

When that happened, Mrs. Henderson led the campaign to gain new memberships for the organization, collecting more than half the signatures herself and inspiring others to get involved.

Edwin B. Henderson, grandson to Mrs. Henderson, talked with the News-Press about the work that his grandmother did. While his grandfather, E.B. Henderson, accomplished a lot for equal rights on a larger national stage, it was usually Mrs. Henderson who led many of the local actions in furthering the cause of African Americans.

E. B. Henderson gained wide notoriety for his effective and insightful letter writing campaign that involved composing over 2,000 letters and articles protesting discrimination to newspapers and journals, including the Washington Star, Washington Post, and Baltimore Sun. But it was his wife, Mrs. Henderson who did a lot of the leg work in local affairs.

She worked more in the background. She quietly went about her work, and I'm sure my grandfather loaded her with tasks, the Grandson Henderson told the News-Press. But Mrs. Henderson's most lauded achievement required her step out into the spotlight.

For years Miss Nellie taught at the all-black school house in Falls Church, a two room wooden structure without central heating or indoor plumbing. As she worked teaching grades 4-7 she was aware of the dramatic difference between the resources given to the white schools and those for the black schools. While Jim Crow laws stated that segregation was based on the races being separate but equal, this was clearly not the case, with white schools receiving over 90% of all available funding.

In response Mrs. Henderson compiled information detailing the inequities. She described the conditions at her school, while giving data comparing funding disparities between black schools and white. The report entitled, *Our Disgrace and Shame: School Facilities for Negro Children in Fairfax County* showed how less than seven percent of all school funds went to Negro schools.

The report caught the attention of parts of the white population in Fairfax County and created a wave of support for the building of a new school, the James Lee School House on Annandale Road, a brick building with indoor plumbing, heating and enough classrooms for each grade to have its own room. Prior to the new building, grades kindergarten through third and fourth through seventh each had to share a single room. After working for a year in the new school house, Miss Nellie retired with 30 years teaching under her belt.

While her tireless work in the community gained her admiration and recognition, she arguably had an even greater impact in the classroom, though it was much more subtle than the kind of work she did with the NAACP.

As news of the new middle school naming became public last month, several of Miss Nellie's former students talked with the News-Press about the woman they remember in their years learning from her. Though over 50 years has passed since she closed the book on that part of her life, her students can still recall clearly their time spent in her classroom.

From them, an interesting portrait is painted of a real lady, in the best sense of the word, one who was both caring and steely, as she grew children into men and women.

It is in that transition from child to adult that many of her former students remember her. In the two room school house that she shared with only one other teacher, Miss Lola, Miss Nellie's classroom was the beginning of adulthood. Miss Lola taught the younger students up to third grade and then Miss Nellie took over in grade four.

Remembering that switch from third to fourth grade still brings smiles to the faces to her former students. Carrol Deskins recalls how as a young boy, moving up to Miss Nellie's room meant a profound shift in attitude.

You could get away with a lot of things in Miss Lola's room that you couldn't get away with in Miss Nellie, he said. You were growing up then. It was a point of growing up going from the third to the fourth grade. When you got into the fourth grade you considered yourself halfway grown anyway.

She had a way to simultaneously discipline and support students as they were trying to find their way. Jackie Mustin came to know Miss Nellie later than many of the other students. She was transferred to the new school and studied under Miss Nellie in her final year at the school.

Nellie became, for Mustin, an inspiration for many of the things she would go on to do in her life, among them being singing. While she insisted that her students be well versed in the basic subjects of history, literature and math, Miss Nellie also encouraged her students to pursue their own gifts.

She was always making us feel good about ourselves. She even let us practice for a talent show she knew we'd never give Mustin laughed. With her teacher's encouragement, Mustin worked to groom her natural singing talent. Eventually the work paid off, earning her a scholarship in voice to New York University, although she decided against the opportunity, and attended Virginia State instead. But she never lost her love for singing, and even had the opportunity to share a stage at the Wolf Trap Performing Arts center singing with famed children's musician Ella Jenkins. But while Mustin loved singing, the reason for not pursuing it also had much to do with Miss Nellie. From her short time as Miss Nellie's student, Mustin came to believe that teaching was one of the most valuable things one could do. She could see how Miss Nellie inspired her and her classmates. Mustin wanted to do the same for others.

Because of Miss Nellie I enjoyed education, she said. I think she was one of the main reasons why I went into it.

After graduating from Virginia State, Mustin returned to Fairfax County, where she took on a variety of tasks. She worked in the head start program for 17 years, assisted with kindergarten students and worked as a liaison between teachers and parents. Overall, she spent 35 years in the Fairfax schools.

Some of Miss Nellie's other students recalled how Miss Nellie would always put a special emphasis on the work of African Americans in national affairs. At that time only a week was devoted to recognizing African Americans and Miss Nellie took full advantage of that time.

She would teach her students about men like Benjamin Banneker, George Washington Carver and Frederick Douglass, to name a few. She also insisted upon them learning the song Lift Every Voice and Sing, known as the Black National Anthem.

Miss Nellie played piano accompanying their singing and also when the students would put on theatrical performances which they would practice for at the school and eventually perform at the nearby Second Baptist Church

But while she encouraged her students to enjoy themselves, she was also deeply concerned with how they comported themselves, and how well they did in school. For her students, it came down to one word, Discipline.

It was a part of living, said Deskins.

Lucille Stallings, another one of Miss Nellie's students agreed. She described how if you broke the rules you would find yourself on the wrong end of a ruler wielded by Miss Nellie. After punishing a student, she would send them home with a note to their parents, knowing that it would get there.

Miss Nellie always kept in touch with the parents of her students, making sure that they were aware of what she was teaching and that they both knew everything that was going on with their kids. It often helped that by the time she reached the end of her career she was often teaching children of her former students.

The combination of personal attention and discipline was very effective. After graduating from her class, her students went on to high school where they were placed with students from other schools. Lucille Stallings remembered high school as being in many ways easier than classes with Miss Nellie. There was never a time I felt behind other students, and sometimes I even felt ahead, she said.

All in all, Miss Nellie put out some good students, former student Lola Chase said. She was a good teacher, that's the bottom line.

For all those fortunate enough to pass through her classroom and listen to her as she taught, Miss Nellie made a permanent impact. But for those whom she touched in more tertiary way, the rivers of time flow swiftly and can often put even the most influential people very quickly into the forgotten past.

In 1965 the Hendersons moved to Tuskegee, Alabama to live near their son, Dr. James Henderson. In 1976 Mary Ellen Miss Nellie Henderson died. A year later her husband passed away as well.

In 1993, almost 30 years after E.B. and Nellie Henderson left Falls Church, their grandson Edwin B. Henderson and his wife moved into their old house on S. Maple Avenue here, given to him as part of his inheritance.

The house had been rented out for the previous 30 years and was separated into several apartments. While the structure was still solid, many things needed to be repaired and remodeled before it could return to its previous form.

Similarly, while members of the community recognized the younger Henderson from his family name and connections, much of the history that had surrounded his grandparents and the work they had done in civil rights had vanished for the most part from public memory.

To a large extent the history of civil rights and the struggles were fading, a lot of things had been forgotten, he said.

Ed Henderson got a job with the public schools and started fixing up the house. He removed dividing walls that had closed off rooms. He fixed the roof and relit the fireplace for the first time in years.

Meanwhile he worked with Falls Church activist David Eckert to create the Tinner Hill Foundation, an organization devoted to preserving local African American history and culture. Eventually, the lives and achievements of E.B. and Mary Ellen Henderson reemerged from the vault of lost memories that had hid them for decades.

Next September, when the new school is dedicated as the Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School, the name will be more than a token remembrance of a popular and powerful woman. It will be a sign that the world can be altered by a person with the courage to work for change on the public stage, while simultaneously willing to take the time to change lives one by one, year after year, in a humble wooden schoolhouse, with no one but history and her own students watching.

Bates, D. (2005, Feb. 17). Mary Ellen 'Nellie' Henderson: A Life of Making Differences, Big and Small. Falls Church City News Press (Falls Church, VA). Retrieved online from: <http://www.fcnpp.com/450/henderson.htm>