

Ezra Bridges

HER VISIONARY LIFE AND IMPACT 1905-2010



Five most influential people Ezra Bridges

A teacher and a leader: 'One of the great ones'

Ask Mrs. Ennis Thomas Whisenant about Ezra Bridges, and her mind flashes back almost 70 years to the old all-black Cleveland School on Hudson Street and the teacher who lived across the street.

The lady who helped changed her life.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "What a teacher Ms. Bridges was. She demanded honesty and integrity. She inspected clothes and hair and nails. She demanded that all of us do our homework. She taught character before anyone ever thought of including that in school curriculum. She taught thousands of black children what they needed to prepare themselves for life."

Mrs. Whisenant, herself over 70, remembered the words as clearly as if they were spoken just now.

"Ezra Bridges told us 'Hold your heads high, children, and learn,'" Mrs. Whisenant said. "I've carried that with me all of my life. There's been no one else quite like her in this world."

The words still come forth from Ezra Bridges, not a torrent any more but a steady stream nonetheless. Words perfectly formed in an elocution that rings in an ear like a clarion call, a bugle for the sleeping soul, to get up and get busy. At 94 years old in 1999, she'd seen it all, done it all, and changed the world.

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ONE CHILD AT A TIME

"I believe in education; I believe so strongly in knowing each child and doing the best one can for that child," Ms. Bridges said. "There is no doubt that education is the key, the only key, to unlocking the wonderful things that are available to all in life."

The Rev. James Smith attended Cleveland

School for six years until integration became reality in the early 1960s and he headed to Shelby Junior High. He said that Ms. Bridges' support for children during those years was inspirational and instrumental to the successes of many black children — many who had been told they were less than equal and were doomed to failure.

"She instilled confidence in us, as she had for decades at Cleveland School," Rev. Smith said. "She told us 'You are as good as anyone else. You can do as well as anyone else. You are as smart as anyone else.' She put it in our minds that we could succeed. And she had been telling black children that for almost 40 years before that."

The Rev. Smith said Ezra Bridges believed in the education of a



■ Ezra Bridges, honored at Time Warner Cable's Star teacher banquet with a lifetime achievement award, shares a laugh with Time-Warner Manager Floyd Williams.

person's whole being.

"She encouraged me to seek higher education and the seminary," the Rev. Smith said. "And she did the same for so many people in this community. Her legacy lives on in people like me and hundreds of others who have done well in life and become leaders of the community. She taught people to have a deep respect for culture and family. There's not another person who has had such an affect on people in this community as Ezra Bridges."

HOMETOWN GIRL BECOMES A LADY TEACHER

Ms. Bridges was born in Shelby in a three-room house on Hudson Street, daughter of the late Bertha Eugenia Bridges and John W. Bridges. After eight years of school, she wasn't allowed to go to Shelby High School.



■ Skipper Bowles, left, in the midst of a gubernatorial campaign swing, gets his picture taken with Ezra Bridges and Patrick Spangler, right.

With the backing of the Missionary Circle of the Shelby Presbyterian Church, she attended Scotia Seminary for teachers. The late Governor O. Max Gardner and his wife, Fay, who paid for her schooling after employing her at their home and seeing in her great promise, also were instrumental in urging her to get an education. So was the late George Blanton Sr., former president of First National Bank, who Ms. Bridges said lent her the money for school.

She taught for 46 years in the Shelby schools, almost all of those teaching elementary grades at the segregated Cleveland School. She taught children with mental handicaps for the last few years of her career, both at Cleveland School and James Love School, before retiring in 1971.

But Ezra Bridges never stopped learning and never stopped teaching, even after retirement. She received a bachelor's degree from Hampton Institute in Virginia in 1942 and a master's from Columbia University in New York in 1946. At the age of 56, she received a professional diploma from Columbia for the teaching of students with mental retardation. She was a force in spiritual life as well at Ryburn Presbyterian Church and with various Presbyterian Church groups.

Ezra Bridges taught blacks, and she taught whites. She served on public boards and spoken up on behalf of the disenfranchised as a member of different groups. She helped change Cleveland County from a

place where two unequal societies hustled through separate lives while rarely brushing shoulders to a place where people lived where they wanted to, went to the same schools and doctors, and raised their children together.

"Ezra Bridges' legacy," said Richard Hooker, member of the Shelby City Schools Board, "is that she brought together all folks and all races of people. When Ms. Ezra Bridges spoke, people listened. She was, and is, a voice of reason, a poignant voice, that carries weight in this community and made Shelby and Cleveland County a better place."

IN HER OWN WORDS

In 1999, Ezra Bridges isn't an afterthought in Cleveland County history. She's alive and vibrant, pushing 95 years old and living in that same house on Hudson Street, directly across the street from the old Cleveland School.

"My eyes were opened at an early age," Ms. Bridges said. "I knew that through education, opportunities would open up for me, and they did. I knew that I could achieve anything I wanted in life if I educated myself and worked hard at it."

For many, Ms. Bridges was Cleveland School. She lived directly across the street and admits that she was never far from her work — either physically or spiritually. The stories are many of her buying coats for those who had none and serving up hot

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meals and extra tutoring.

"It was my duty to do the best I could for those children," she said. "There were many that didn't have much, especially during hard economic times, and I did what I could for all of them."

She took particular pride in her work with mentally handicapped children in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

"Through teaching those children, really teaching them and knowing them, we were able to place many in jobs such as at Cleveland Cloth Company and at other jobs. Every child can learn something. Not every child will be a doctor or a lawyer. But every child can be prosperous and productive."

When it comes to race relations in Cleveland County, there's no book. But if there were one, Ezra Bridges could be its author.

She said that she never looked at people in terms of black and white, despite her having to attend segregated schools and teaching at a segregated school for almost 40 years.

"I've always looked at what's best for each child, at trying to teach every child so that each one can do better in this life," Ms. Bridges said. "My goal remains that today, for each child to strive to do the best he can and be the best he can be."



■ Ezra Bridges gets the keys to the new Holly Oak Park community center from Clarence Palmer.

But she still wouldn't slow down. In 1999, she was busy working on a book on the black schools of the county, a book on the Shelby Presbytery, a book on the history of Ryburn Presbyterian Church.

And every day she sees that past and that present and that future when she looks through the bay windows of her Hudson Street home at the old Cleveland School, a ghost among the memories for Ezra Bridges, filled with phalanxes of children marching through life, armed with an education.

"I admit I do remember the good things when I look over there," she said. "We made a difference over there. We sure did."

THE LADY WHO COULD

Ezra Bridges' resumé reads like a history of Cleveland County in the past 40 years. She served for more than 20 years on the Cleveland County Planning Board. She served on the Board of Directors for the Cleveland Home Health Agency, was on the Board of Trustees for the Cleveland Memorial Hospital and helped found Holly Oak Park. Her name even adorns a housing development in west Shelby.

She served Governor Jim Hunt on two state-level boards, helped found and run the Ryburn Presbyterian Church day care center from 1975 to 1990, and worked as a teacher and social worker for the Shelby Head Start program from 1961 until 1971. The list goes on and on for this selfless lady who never married.

She even wrote for *The Star*, writing a section for the paper called "Negro News."

"Quite simply, Ezra Bridges is one of the great leaders of our time in Cleveland County," said Les Roark, former Shelby mayor and a historian of the county. "She served all members of this community, black and white, with great enthusiasm and concern for the common good. She's an all around great human being, a true diplomat, who had a way of saying things that was unique and forceful. Her impact on the community and its betterment is as permanent as any there are."

Boyce Morrison, longtime head of instruction and assistant superin-

tendent for Shelby Schools from 1955 through 1986, said that Ms. Bridges had few peers in the field of elementary education and child development.

"She was a very professional teacher who excelled in early childhood development," Morrison said. "She was instrumental in starting a pre-kindergarten program here in the early 1960s and making it an excellent program that served all our children. She was an important force in integrating education here, but more importantly was a teacher of all children."

Morrison said that the pre-kindergarten program that Ms. Bridges helped develop provided the opportunity for learning for underprivileged children.

"She was a very effective leader and teacher, who worked quietly and didn't seek the limelight," Morrison said. "She was very well respected by her peers, black and white. She was a real leader in the Shelby community for years and years."

Longtime Shelby civic leaders Esther Anne and Edwin Ford each served with Ms. Bridges. Mrs. Ford sat on the hospital board with Ms. Bridges, and Mr. Ford worked on the United Way allocation committee with her.

"When she spoke, people listened, whether it was as a member of the board or a member of the community as a whole," Mrs. Ford said. "She was a quiet leader and a fine, fine person. Truly one of the great ones."

"She was always an advocate for education and cared so much for the development of all people," Mr. Ford said. "She is unselfish and gracious. She made a big difference in this town, that's for certain, for all of us."

Former Shelby City Schools Board member Lamar "Buddy" Young called Ms. Bridges' effect on the integration of the city's schools, "a legacy that will outlast us all. Ms. Ezra Bridges was essential to the successful integration of our schools, plain and

simple. Her influence is felt today, almost 40 years later, and it will be felt by generations to come."

Young said that both whites and blacks in the Shelby community held Ms. Bridges' opinion in the highest esteem and that she was sought out for advice during integration.

"She was one of the most dedicated teachers to ever work in the Shelby system," Young said. "Her peers respected her, the board respected her, and the community respected her. She was a force."

But whether the praise rises forth from former students in an all-black school like Mrs. Whisenant or the Rev. Smith, or former colleagues like Mrs. Ford and Buddy Young, Ezra Bridges will be remembered as a lady who wanted the best for the children of



■ Ezra Bridges meets Gov. Jim Hunt during his first term as governor.



Cleveland County.

White or black.

"I'll never forget her," Smith said. "What she taught, and how she taught, is reflected in the people of this county even today. She was special, an icon at Cleveland School and in the community. A person who cared for us all."