

Her passions: Education and race relations

104-year-old Ezra Bridges followed her dreams and encouraged others to do the same.

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SHELBY

Shortly after World War I, a teenage African American girl went to work as a maid in the Shelby household of O. Max Gardner, North Carolina's governor in the early years of the Great Depression.

Ezra Bridges, who died Friday at 104, went on to earn a master's degree from Columbia University and began a long career as a distinguished educator in Cleveland County.

A community leader who worked tirelessly to improve race relations, she received numerous awards and in 2006 had a Shelby neighborhood, with 16 Habitat for Humanity homes, named in her honor.

"She was a lady for all generations," said Lou London, a long-time friend. "She was comfortable talking with everybody from children to senior citizens."

London, a teacher at Burns Middle School, connected with Bridges in the late 1980s and called her "a confidante."

"She was always helping people," London said. "She taught them to never give up – that it was never too late to pursue your dream."

According to London, a message Bridges pounded home to young people was "go to school and get yourself an education and better yourself."

Bridges graduated from Shelby public schools in 1918 and completed preparatory high school teacher training at Scotia Seminary in 1925.

In 1942, she earned a bachelor of science degree from Hampton Institute.

Bridges got her master's from Columbia in 1946, and earned a diploma from Columbia in 1962 as a teacher for the mentally retarded.

For nearly five decades, she taught mentally retarded students in Cleveland County and Shelby schools.

“She was one of the greatest people I’ve ever known,” said former Shelby Mayor Les Roark, 85. “She was dedicated to her teaching responsibilities, her spiritual responsibilities and her political responsibilities.”

Shelby lawyer O. Max Gardner III considered Bridges a member of the family.

He said Bridges was planning to accompany his grandfather to London in 1947 when he was appointed ambassador to England. She was at the New York hotel when the former governor died of a heart attack the night before he was to leave.

“She was a very special person to me,” said Gardner, 64. “I learned much about my family through her. She was a treasure.”

He admired her focus on education.

“Her life is an example of someone who started out before women even had the right to vote and worked herself up,” Gardner said.

“Her leadership in the relations between the races should be right up there with her desire and passion for education.”

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