

# Cleveland County loses beloved community member

[Comments 2](#) | [Recommend 0](#)

Saturday, Feb 20 2010, 9:29 pm

[Rebecca Clark](#)

- [Web Feature: Ezra Bridges - Her Visionary Life and Impact \(1905-2010\)](#)

SHELBY — When Ezra Bridges was 97, she said she hoped to live to be 100.

“My mind is clear, I have my sight and I’m happy to be part of this great county,” she said after receiving an award at the Distinguished Women of Cleveland County’s annual banquet that year.

Bridges, who died Friday at Cleveland Pines Nursing Center, lived to see 100. Plus four more years.

The beloved community member and retired educator made an impact on many lives over her long life and acquired an outstanding list of accomplishments, awards and honors, testifying to her whole-hearted service to Cleveland County.

“She was a good friend, a wonderful friend,” said Dot Roark, who knew Bridges for more than 50 years.

She first met Bridges through the American Association of University Women and worked for her one summer when Bridges was a Head Start director.

“She was a person that was a real servant,” Roark said. “She would often repeat to me her favorite Bible verse; I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. That was her mantra through her whole life.”

Roark said she nominated Bridges for the distinguished women award in 2002.

“She just was a person who was devoted to her career in education, but she was also devoted to her church, she was devoted to her community, she was just all out to serve people,” Roark said.

She said she enjoyed visiting with Bridges and hearing her reminisce.

“She just enjoyed life and was a friend to every one, it didn’t matter what walk of life,” Roark said. “We’re going to miss her, she’s a real legend.”

Cothenia Jolley, a retired educator, worked closely with Bridges as they put together the history of Cleveland County Schools.

Jolley said Bridges worked on the history of black schools and was still doing typing for the book in her 90s.

“She was an unusual person,” Jolley said. “She taught so many young people. She always wanted to be sure that her people had the opportunity to go to college and better themselves. She did everything she could to encourage them.”

She said many of Bridges’ former students would come back to visit her over the years.

“You could just see the love they had for her and the appreciation,” Jolley said.

David Thompson, of First National Bank, handled financial matters for Bridges since just before her move to Cleveland Pines a few years ago.

“I have thoroughly enjoyed working with her,” Thompson said. “She’s a lot of fun, a neat lady and very humbling. I do think that her life is most unusual.

“I’ve thought many times about what she has come through to get where she is. And I know it’s true that if you wanted something done, just turn it over to her.”

Enloe Mortuary will handle her service. It will be held at Shelby Presbyterian Church, because her church, Ryburn Memorial Presbyterian, is too small. Complete arrangements will be announced later by the funeral home.

Ezra Bridges was born in Cleveland County and received her early schooling in Shelby Public Schools. She completed high school and teacher training at Scotia Seminary, earned a master’s degree at Teacher’s College of Columbia University, N.Y.; and a professional supervisor/teacher diploma for the mentally retarded from Columbia University, N.Y.

Bridges' work history included a domestic worker in the home of Governor O. Max Gardner, teacher, social worker and director of Shelby Project Head Start and correspondent for the The Star.

Her community service included:

Life membership, United Fund Board of Directors

Board of Trustees, Cleveland Memorial Hospital

Salvation Army Board of Directors

Members, Parks and Recreation Board

Chairperson of Advisory Board for acquisition of Holly Oak Park

Council of Aging Board of Directors

Member and secretary of first Human Relations Council

Served on committee for the hiring of first black policeman.

Served on committee writing the history of schools in Cleveland County.

State appointments and service:

Appointed by Gov. James Hunt to serve on the Teacher's and State Employee's Retirement System

Appointed by the Gov. to serve on the N.C. Certification Board for Social Workers.

Active in her church Ryburn Memorial Presbyterian Church as well as Shelby Presbyterian Church

Awards:

Cora B. Rippy Woman of the Year, Shelby Negro Women's Club

Miss Cleveland County, senior citizen

Pioneer Girl Scout Council Women of Distinction Award

City of Shelby honored her with the naming of the Ezra Bridges Housing Development and Park in West Shelby

United Way Outstanding Community Service/Lifetime Directorship in recognition of outstanding achievement in serving human needs.

Shelby Presbyterian Church Women, recognition of her outstanding service to the Presbyterian Church.

Cleveland County lost one of its most beloved and well known community members Friday.

Ezra Agnes Bridges, who celebrated her 104-birthday last July, died at Cleveland Pines Nursing Center.

The retired educator has made an impact on countless lives over the years and has a long list of accomplishments, including being the first black woman in the county to receive her Master's degree.

Bridges was instrumental in compiling and preserving the history of black schools in the area which was published as part of a series on schools in Cleveland County.

Bridges also started work in the 60s that helped bring Head Start, a pre-k program, to the county and due to her advocating for adequate housing for all, Cleveland County Habitat for Humanity dedicated a housing community in her honor several years ago.

"(She's) had an impact on each and every one of us," Henry Clark, associate minister at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Gastonia, previously told The Star at her last birthday celebration.

Bridges often spoke with fervor about helping children with special needs, fighting the drug and crime problems one maladjusted child at a time and continuing to make a better community for all.

She has been described as a true piece of living history and one of Cleveland County's most beloved and admired women.