Born with a Purpose

By Jerry Long
c.2026

Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 15 July 1997, p.2D:

H.L. Neblett Center Summer Challenge JTPA workers attended the recent dedication of historical plaques at Kendall-Perkins Park. The students are working for eight weeks this summer interviewing local residents and collecting audio and video recordings of African-American history. The tapes will be kept at the Daviess County Public Library and at the Kentucky Oral History Commission in Frankfort. The program is part of the Owensboro Settlement Bicentennial Commemoration.

Pictured with Aloma Dew, Summer Challenge '97 coordinator; Patricia Gibson, H.L. Neblett Center Job Training Partnership Act coordinator; and Whaylon Coleman, technical assistant, are Tabitha Newton, William Johnson, Mistey Ledlow, Theresa Mitchell, Abel Douglas, Heather Owen, Latajha Handley, Teresa Newton, Natasha Johnson, Eric Floyd, Lolitta Warfield and D'Marco Douglas. Not pictured is Chanda Swift.

Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 27 July 1997, p.5C:

Summer Challenge '97
having public reception

The H.L. Neblett Community Center Work World Preparation JTPA Summer Challenge '97 program will have a public reception at 7 p.m. Monday, July 28, at the Owensboro Museum of Science and History. The workers will present the outcome of the eight-week summer job program – a video, a slide show and a book.

Participants conducted oral interviews with African Americans emphasizing wartime experiences, community changes, integration, the Great Depression and school experiences. The audio tapes will become part of the archival record and be housed in Frankfort with the Kentucky Oral History Commission and in the Kentucky Room at the Daviess County Public Library.

The program was conducted in cooperation with the Owensboro Settlement Bicentennial Committee and was funded by the Green River Private Industry Council and the Workforce Development Cabinet with JTPA (Job Training Parternship Act) funds. The workers in the summer program were Abel Douglas, D'Marco Douglas, Eric Floyd, Latajha Handley, Natasha Johnson, William Johnson, Mistey Ledlow, Theresa Mitchell, Tabitha Newton, Teresa Newton, Heather Owen, Chanda Swift and Lolitta Warfield.

The H.L. Neblett Center JTPA Summer Coordinator was Aloma Williams Dew and technical assistant was Whaylon Coleman Jr.

<u>Messenger-Inquirer</u>, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 9 November 1997, p.1G & 4G:

'Born with a Purpose'

Community project results in book about contributions of local African Americans

By

Aloma Williams Dew
Owensboro Historian

Project Participants

The participants in the Jobs Training Partnership Act program were Whaylon Coleman Jr., Abel Douglas, D'Marco Douglas, Eric Floyd, Latajha Handley, Natasha Johnson, William Johnson, Mistey Ledlow, Theresa Mitchell, Tabitha Newton, Teresa Newton, Heather Owen, Chanda Swift and Lolitta Warfield.

Do you remember those essays your teacher always assigned the first week of school, "What I Did Last Summer?" In Owensboro 14 young people got a job and learned some history in the process. The essays they wrote make up a book entitled "Born with a Purpose: Interviews with African Americans in Owensboro, Kentucky."

The project was a part of a Jobs Training Partnership Act program through the H. L. Neblett Center and the Owensboro Settlement Bicentennial Committee to conduct oral interviews in the African American community and to document with tapes, a video, a slide show and a book segment of this community's history which has long been ignored.

It is a rich and exciting story of men and women who went to war or helped with the war effort at home, who experienced the degradation and exclusivity of segregation and the upheaval of integration and the 1960s Civil Rights movement. It is about ordinary people who worked hard to make a better life for their children, and about activists who pushed the limits. It is about firsts and lasts – about coping and hoping.

For eight weeks the young people, black and white, worked together for a common goal. It went beyond paychecks and 8-to-5; it went to the heart of a community within a community. As it so often is with learning, it brought pride, self-esteem, awe even some anger.

What they did was something of infinite value for Owensboro. They saved and recorded a little bit of this community's rich history, a history which is lost piece by piece every time one of our older citizens dies.

In their words for the young people, "You have given future generations your remembrances of how neighbors and relatives in our community lived in the past. We can now better appreciate your experiences and sacrifices which have made our lives better."

Everyone has a story. History is about everybody's story – all of us, black and white, old and young, men and women, ordinary and extraordinary, those who chose to stay and those who leave. Finally, the "rest of the story" is being recorded.

Fannie Dorsey, a former teacher and an activist for the elderly who served as a member of the Federal Council on Aging during the Carter Administration, gave the project its theme. She said, "Why are we here, except for the good of others? I was reared to believe we are born with a purpose." She was honored by the Older Women's League in 1982 for her work, one of only six people throughout the nation so honored.

There are well-known names in the African American community, and their contributions deserve respect. Wesley Acton, a retired teacher, has devoted countless hours to the preservation of Greenwood Cemetery which was for many years the burial ground for the county's African Americans.

He was also active in the Civil Rights movement here in the 1950s and 1960s. Acton was one of the brave young blacks who challenged the policy of Owensboro restaurants that served whites only. He served as president of the Owensboro NAACP and may have been the first black to teach in an integrated school in Kentucky.

Ninety-one-year-old Camille Berkley is the oldest member of Center Street Baptist Church. She remembers being baptized as a young girl in a pond at Chautauqua Park by the Rev. G. T. Tandy. She became the first black librarian at the Daviess County Public Library. Before integration she was the librarian at Western High School and kept the library open after school and on Saturdays for black residents to check out books.

Gustava and Wilbert Hayden, at 84 and 101 years of age, remember a quite different Owensboro, a town of horses and buggies and unpaved streets. Gustava Hayden remembers clearly when refrigeration was provided by ice boxes with large blocks of ice, delivered by the ice man.

Wilbert Hayden was trained as a sharpshooter in World War I, but the war ended before he was sent overseas. The Haydens recall a simpler time when children played games such as croquet and mumbly peg, marbles and horseshoes, and when store-bought "light bread" was neither sliced nor wrapped.

Rose Hynes left Owensboro to become a nurse because the nursing school in Owensboro did not allow black students. She became the first black registered nurse in the operating room at the University of Arkansas medical school. Later she was the director of the school of nursing at Prairie View A&M College in Texas. After earning an MA at Indiana University, Hynes moved to Baltimore, taught medical and surgical nursing and became director of the unit.

She reflected, "We so quickly forget. We need to remember how we got where we are."

An exhibit of Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Moneta Sleet Jr. recently closed at the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art. Sleet grew up in Owensboro during the 1930s but had to leave to pursue his passion for photojournalism. The only Pulitzer winner from this area, Sleet is known around the world for his photographs of Martin Luther King Jr. and of the grieving Coretta Scott King at Dr. King's funeral.

To meet Paul Jackson is to run head-on into a compendium of history, theater and activism. Jackson attended Rosenwald School near Pleasant Ridge before moving into Owensboro. He vividly recalls a segregated Owensboro where blacks lived in Baptist Town, Snow Hill, Strawberry Ridge and Mechanicaville and went to Western High School, the only black high school in the area. He remembers horses and buggies on the streets and when automobiles first appeared: Model T Fords sold for $350.

Too young to fight in World War I, Jackson contributed to the war effort in World War II by working at a meat packing plant where beef was packaged and frozen for the U.S. Navy. He jokingly recalls, "I had to buy steak on the installment plan – put a little something down on it and go back and get it later."

Jackson adds an emotional thrill to any history lesson with his recitation of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. If you want a new perspective and a lesson in humility, ask for his story about "who is colored?"

Earl Kuykendall, who recently died, told workers last summer about his experiences with the Works Progress Administration. He was a director of recreational projects organizing softball leagues, dances and arts and crafts lessons. He remembered when blacks were allowed only at certain movie theaters and then only in the balcony. He recalled the Palace Theater on Eighth Street, where for the first time blacks did not have to sit in the balcony. The choice of films was not great, however, and the Palace did not prosper.

Juanita Moorman told about how the flood of 1937 reached almost to her house and how her parents took turns sitting up all night to watch the rising waters in case they needed to evacuate.

Moorman keenly recalled the dark days of segregation of not being able to eat at Kresge's lunch counter, when water fountains were labeled "whites only" and "colored." There was no place for blacks to swim in the summer and African Americans were forced to sit in the back of public buses and segregated on trains.

Moorman became the first black clerk at the W. T. Grant department store in 1965 and became supervisor of her department. She remembers being shunned by some of her fellow workers and drawing 20 cents per hour less than her white co-workers.

Nathanial Thompson has lived in the West End of Owensboro all his life and can remember when the area supported restaurants, bars, pool halls, grocery stores, barbers and a tailor, as well

three black doctors – Dr. Simpson, Dr. Cornelius, and Dr. Neblett. He believes the down side to integration was the disappearance of a thriving black professional and business community.

Thompson worked at the Evansville shipyard and the Chrysler Defense Plant in Evansville during World War II, as did many – both black and white – from this county. He worked on a production line boxing 45-caliber bullets.

There is a wealth of history in Owensboro's older citizens waiting to be recorded and saved. A vibrant community needs a strong collective memory – each generation needs to know what happened before its time.

It needs to understand the humanity, the sacrifices and the contributions of those who came before. Certainly the momentous events such as wars, depressions and natural disasters need to be recorded along with the "important" people who make significant contributions. But the stories of ordinary people, the music and dances and entertainment of their times, the shaping influences of their lives, their hopes and dreams and frustrations should also be recorded.

Fourteen high school and college students needed a job and a paycheck last summer. They got more than they bargained for. They grew as they learned of history in their community which they had never been taught.

Sometimes they were angered and shocked; sometimes amused. They now have a connectedness with the community. And they gave a great gift to their community by recording a small bit of its history, and to the interviewees by allowing them to tell their stories.

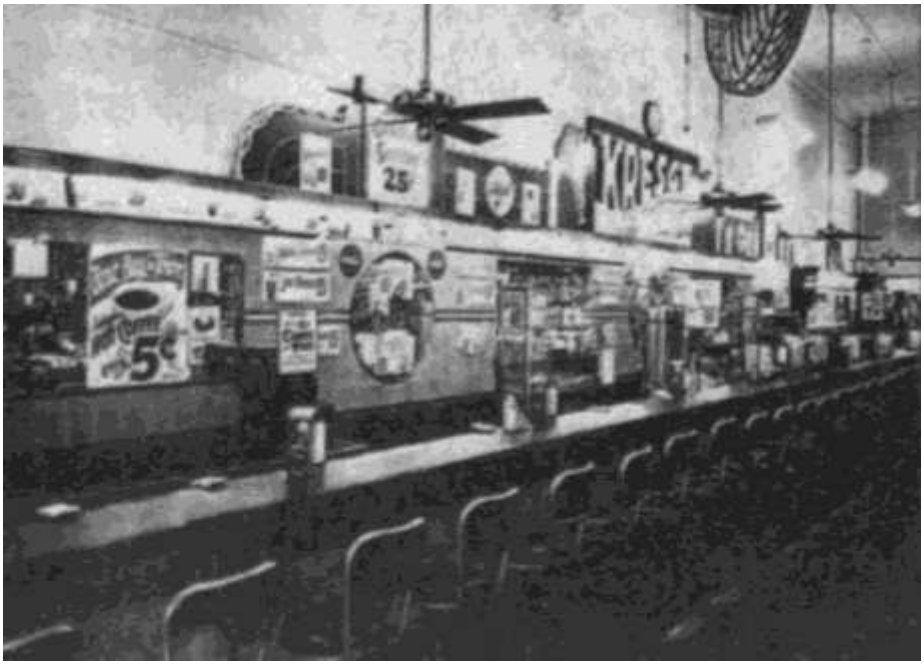
Their project won the state JTPA Workplace Learning Program award, presented in Frankfort in October, and is now a candidate for the national award.

The books are available in the Kentucky Room of the Daviess County Public Library.

What did you do last summer?

The Western High School Class of 1911 is shown here. Seated, left to right, are Lucille Marie Hunter, O.A. Gutherie (prinicpal), Delphene Mosley and Ethel C. Hall. Standing, left to right, are Theressa (Babe) Wilhite, Levi James, Rida Virginia McMickens, Emma Ernestine Edwards, Elmo Bean and Esther Jane Richardson.

The Community Drum and Bugle Corps was sponsored by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Moneta Sleet Jr., at far right, went on to become the only Pulitzer Prize winner from the Daviess County area.



Juanita Moorman recalls the dark days of segregation, which included blacks not being able to eat at the lunch counter at Kresge's.

<u>Messenger-Inquirer</u>, Owensboro, KY, Monday, 6 July 1998, pp.1A &2A:

Teens working on Baptisttown history

Students surprised to find once vibrant black community

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Sheralle Douglas is gathering memories this summer.

"I'm learning a lot of stuff I've never heard about my neighborhood," the 16-year-old Owensboro High School student says. "Baptisttown used to have a lot of restaurants and businesses owned by blacks. I would love to have seen it then. I wonder what happened to it?"

She'll learn that and more this summer as one of 12 teens compiling a history of Owensboro's African American community.

This is the second year of the summer project sponsored by the H.L. Neblett Community Center's Work World Preparation JTPA Summer Challenge. The Green River Area Development District secured a $9,956 grant for the program's second year.

And Aloma Williams Dew, project coordinator, hopes there's money next year to complete the project.

"There is no published history of the African American community in Owensboro," the local historian says. "And more of the memories are vanishing every day."

So, the students are working 40-hour weeks, armed with tape recorders and video cameras, capturing memories of the city's black community.

And many of those memories are of Baptisttown, the area that grew up around Fourth Street Baptist Church, which in 1843 became the city's first African American church.

Back then, 34.7 percent of Owensboro's population was black. Today, it's 6.4 percent.

In the memories of those who knew it in its prime, Baptisttown was a special place.

Jennifer Taylor, 18, shares a laugh with Owensboro native Richard Brown on Wednesday. Taylor is one of 12 teens compiling a history of Owensboro's African American community.

Brothers Richard and Charles Brown remember harmonizing on the street corner in front of the old Savoy Club and the Cozy Bar on West Fifth Street in the mid-1950s.

On Saturday nights, the soldiers poured in to Baptisttown's clubs from Fort Campbell and old Camp Breckinridge in Union County, they say.

"Everything you've heard about Fifth Street wasn't a lie," Charles Brown says with a chuckle at the street's old reputation as a walk on the wild side.

"You'd dress up just to come out and lay back to watch the action," says Richard Brown, who was known as "Crazy Legs" in those days.

"And you'd never come on Fifth Street at night without a suit and tie," Charles Brown adds.

Next to the Cozy Bar was Talbott's barber shop, a funeral home, a grocery store and a drugstore. It was a busy street on a Saturday in the '50s.

And there on the corner by the Savoy, teen-age boys would gather to harmonize in the doo-wop sound that was sweeping the country in those days.

"There'd be eight or nine of us – sometimes even girls," Charles Brown recalls. "The police would come and run us off. But after a while, they started coming around just to listen." In the days of segregation, Baptisttown flourished as a city within a city with black doctors, lawyers, photographers, theaters, grocery stores, department stores, restaurants, churches and nightclubs.

"There was even an African American newspaper," Dew says. "But we haven't been able to find a copy." "So much of our history is being lost," Richard Brown says, after being interviewed on camera by Jennifer Taylor, an 18-year-old Owensboro High School senior.

"It helps us to remember what our past has been like and to put things in perspective as we talk about them," he said.

Brown, a 1961 graduate of old Western High School, was among the last students of the city's segregated schools.

Integration, he says, was right. "But we weren't prepared for it." At the black schools, Brown said, there were bands, theater groups and a number of extra curricular activities. But when black students entered the white schools in the '60s, he said, many were embarrassed or afraid to try out for band or plays.

"You can hardly find a (black) piano player in Owensboro today," Brown said.

Taylor said she has been surprised to learn how many civic clubs the black community had. "And I didn't know churches had basket dinners," she said. "Our doesn't. They sound like fun."

Chanda Swift, a 19-year-old sophomore at Murray State University, is one of three students who returned from last summer.

"Last year, we learned more history," she said. "This year, we're learning about food, churches, clubs, social and cultural organizations."

Swift said the project is "trying to bring everything up to the present – because someday this will be history too."

VaRahnica Holmes, an 18-year-old OHS graduate, will be a freshman at Radford University in Virginia this fall.

"I've only lived here a year and a half, so I'm learning a lot about Owensboro," she said. "But I've heard my father and his friends talk about a lot of the things I'm hearing this summer."

She was impressed to learn that Baptisttown once had a swimming pool and a skating rink.

Dew said the group is creating a Web page that will include a slide show.

Both the Web page and the other materials compiled by the students will be completed in time for a July 31 reception at the Owensboro Area Museum of Science & History, she said.

The audio and video tapes, as well as the transcripts of the interviews, will be kept in the Kentucky Room at the Daviess County Public Library and at the Oral History Commission in Frankfort.

"This is very much like the WPA days," Dew said.

During the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration put unemployed people to work building such things as Rash Stadium, the seven-story section of Owensboro Mercy Health System and the water tower on West Fourth Street.

But the WPA Federal Writers Project also put Cecelia Laswell of Owensboro to work on a variety of projects, including interviews with ex-slaves and narratives of early times in the area.

A copy of Laswell's work is also filed in the Kentucky Room.

Project Participants

The students have been divided into three teams — video: Fay Taylor, VaRahnica Holmes, Erica Carbon and Jennifer Taylor; book: Mistey Ledlow, Chanda Swift, Natasha Johnson, Heather Midkiff and Hunter Hinton; and slide show/Web page: Alishia Shelton, Donovan Morton and Sheralle Douglas. Rhondalyn Randolph is the technical assistant on the project.

Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 24 February 1999, p.4C:

Teen history writers to be honored

The writers of "Born with a Purpose," will be recognized at 3 p.m. Saturday, at the H.L. Neblett Community Center.

Teen-agers, with help of Owensboro historian Aloma Dew, wrote a history of Baptisttown by interviewing area residents, who also will be at the dinner.

The guest speaker is the Rev. Larry D. Lewis of Zion Baptist Church. The program is free, and dinner will be served. The menu includes meatloaf, liver and onions, barbecued ribs, fried chicken, cabbage and collard greens, mashed potatoes, green beans, fried corn, macaroni and cheese and corn bread.

Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 17 June 1999, pp.1A & 2A:

Voices of History

JTPA oral history attracting attention in its third year

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

For more than a century, Baptisttown flourished as a black city within a white Owensboro.

There were doctors and lawyers, photographers, theaters, grocery stores, department stores, restaurants, churches and nightclubs.

But with integration, the businesses of Baptisttown disappeared – almost without a trace.

Little of the black community's history has been recorded. Until now.

For the third consecutive summer, 14 high school and college students are working 40-hour weeks through the H.L. Neblett Community Center's Work World Preparation JTPA Summer Challenge to salvage bits and pieces of Owensboro's black history one memory at a time.

"I'm very much in awe of this project," Doug Boyd, archivist for the Kentucky Oral History Commission in Frankfort, said Wednesday. "It's the only project of its kind in the state, where the JTPA is using history to give job training."

The Job Training Partnership Act is designed to equip workers with marketable skills.

Boyd was in Owensboro earlier this week for a two-day workshop with the students.

"One of the interviews they did two years ago is in the permanent collection of the Kentucky History Center," he said. "When you look at the exhibit on the Great Depression, you'll see the Rev. R.L. McFarland (of Owensboro) on videotape telling what it was like for him."

Natasha Johnson, the only student to work on the project all three years, did that interview with McFarland, a former Owensboro city commissioner.

"It's great to see your name on something," the 19-year-old Owensboro Community College student said. "I haven't seen it yet, but I want to."

Aloma Williams Dew, the project coordinator, hasn't seen the exhibit either. "But I cannot tell you how excited I am," she said. "We hope this program can be a national model for the JTPA."

Boyd said professional historians working on an oral history of the civil rights movement in Kentucky are studying the Owensboro project and re-interviewing several of the people the students have talked to.

Johnson said the work has been important to her because even though her parents and grandparents were from Owensboro, she grew up in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Her family moved back to Owensboro when she was 14.

"This has let me see Owensboro the way it was when my parents and grandparents were growing up," she said. "I didn't know anybody when we moved back here. But I've met so many people in the community through this project. And I've become good friends with several of the older people we've interviewed."

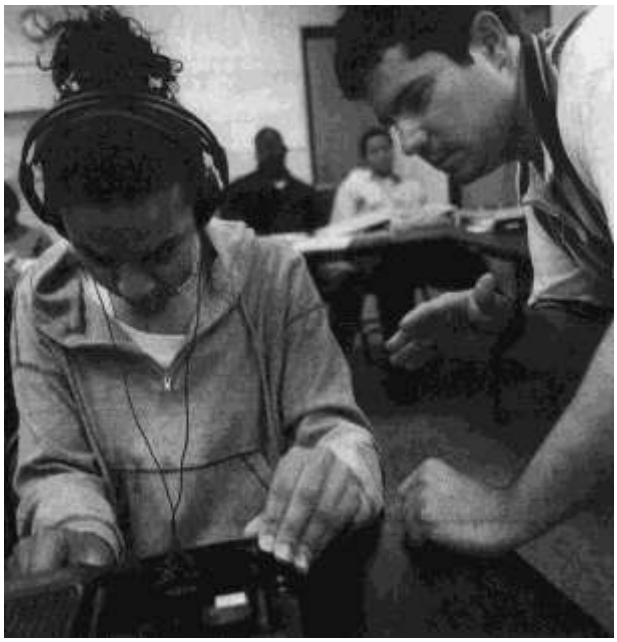
Dew said this summer – the final year of the project – students are collecting interviews about the role of music and dance, women, neighborhoods and family reunions in the black community.

"History is everybody's story," she said. "But in most books, it's a white guy's story. Precious little black history is taught in schools. And we need to share what we've been doing with other communities. There's this rich history that has never been recorded and it's being lost."

The students' work can narrow the gap of missing information on Owensboro's black history, Dew said. "But there's no way we can get it all. So much information has already been lost because the only people who knew it are dead."

"They're doing a good job," Boyd said. "They're changing lives."

Videotapes and transcripts of the interviews are available at the Kentucky Oral History Commission in Frankfort, the Kentucky Room in the Daviess County Public Library and the Owensboro Area Museum of Science and History.



Audio technician Fay Taylor, 17, adjusts the recording level under the watchful eyes of Doug Boyd, an oral history specialist with the Kentucky Oral History Commission in Frankfort, during a trial interview Tuesday morning in the library at Kentucky Wesleyan College. Taylor and her fellow JTPA students will begin interviews with local black residents later this month using recording equipment donated through a technical assistance grant from the commission.

Inscription on marker in Kendall – Perkins Park,
1201 West Fifth Street, Owensboro, KY:

The African American Community in Owensboro

The years after the Civil War saw Owensboro's African-American community grow. The more than 3,000 blacks in Daviess County dwelt mostly in the rural areas in 1860, but by 1900 most lived in Owensboro. The lure of jobs, changes in agriculture, and the attractions of a thriving black community led to the concentration of the African-American population in the city.

Many found jobs in the booming industries such as distilling, tobacco warehousing and stripping, and wood products; while others worked as teamsters or on the steamboats and railroads. Others were employed in service industries such as hotels and restaurants.

Segregation laws restricted blacks in this era, and forced African-Americans to look to themselves for their progress and happiness. There were many black-owned businesses, some of which served

the black community and others, downtown, which catered to both races. There were three black physicians practicing in Owensboro in 1900.

Black schools, churches, social clubs and fraternal organizations formed the nucleus of a thriving black cultural life which included black chautauquas, theater performances and athletic and musical organizations.

Black children were educated at Dunbar School on the city's east side, and at Western School, which included both elementary and high school departments.

The end of segregation brought new challenges to African-Americans in Owensboro. Under the leadership of Prof. H. E. Goodloe and others the way was paved for the integration of the schools in the early 1960's.

With the closing of Western High School on West Third Street (now the H. E. Goodloe Center) and the end of the system of segregation, Owensboro's African-American population entered a new era, complete with new challenges and opportunities.

KENDALL – PERKINS PARK

This park was formerly known as Douglas Park in honor of Frederick Douglas, slave abolitionist. In 1973, renamed in memory of Joe N. Kendall and Joseph P. Perkins, two contemporary citizens of this community. These men gave many years of unselfish and tireless devotion to growth and development of children in this community. Those who benefited say thanks.