

Historic Perspective: The courageous life of Barbara Sizemore (Part I)

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Some biographers assert that Dr. Barbara Ann Sizemore's career in education spanned 57 years, from March 23, 1947, the day she graduated from Northwestern University, to July 24, 2004, the date of her death.

In reality, Barbara was deeply involved in education from the day she was born. Her mother, Delila Alexander Laffoon, made sure of that.

Her father was Sylvester Laffoon, son of William and Viola Laffoon and a celebrated athlete at Terre Haute Wiley High School. A 1925 Wiley graduate, "Sy" played football and track at Indiana State Normal until he married Delila two years later.

Sy and his older brother Herbert (Wiley Class of 1924), an All-State football player, were components on Wiley's 880-yard relay team that won consecutive Indiana titles in 1923 and 1924. Herb moved to Evanston, Ill., after graduating from high school.

Soon after their marriage, Sy and Delila relocated to Evanston to seek employment. They were living there with Herb when Barbara was born on Dec. 27, 1927.

The hospital in Evanston would not admit Delila because she was black. As a result, Barbara was born at the Cook County Hospital in Chicago.

It was Barbara's first brush with racism but just one of many obstacles she confronted as an African-American. It later aroused her passion to be an educational trailblazer.

The experience soured the Laffoons on life in Evanston so they returned to Terre Haute. Sy worked at his father barber shop, first at 1532 Wabash Ave., and then at 700 S. 14th St., which served as a restaurant, barber shop and residence.

For the first eight grades, Barbara attended Booker T. Washington School. "It was the best school experience of my life," she later declared.

Her third grade teacher was Jane Dabney Shackelford, author of "The Child's History of the Negro," the first children's history book about African-Americans.

"My seventh grade teacher was John Wesley Lyda," she recalled in a film interview shortly before her death. "He wrote, 'The Negro in the State of Indiana.'

“Those were the kind of teachers I had,” Sizemore remembered. “It was a close-knit community in Terre Haute. If you misbehaved in school, a teacher might just stop by the house.

“Back in those days . . . we were whipped. My grandmother would give you a whipping. She would send you out to get a switch and, if you brought back a little switch, you would get whipped more. So you were afraid to get a little switch. You would have to bring a switch that she felt was appropriate for the occasion.”

When asked if she was ever visited by a teacher for disciplinary purposes, she admitted that she had been.

“I just could not stop talking in school,” she explained. “I could show you my report card. I would have all ‘As’ and an ‘F’ in deportment. I couldn’t stop talking.”

For the ninth grade, Barbara attended Sarah Scott Junior High School. “That was my first integrated school,” she offered.

“I had a wonderful eighth grade teacher,” Sizemore declared. “She was a magnificent woman. Her name was Marguerite Taylor. About the third week of my eighth grade year she told us she was going to teach us Algebra.

“When you get to Sarah Scott,” Miss Taylor warned, “everyone there is going to know algebra. And I will not have it that the only people who do not know algebra are Negroes.”

Miss Taylor was a different teacher. “If you did not make an A or a B, she would sit you down and say, ‘How can you do this to me?’

“It was like someone had hit her! She let you know that you hurt her. I never had a teacher who was so passionate about her students learning and took it so personally.”

Was Miss Taylor’s approach effective? “I can’t speak for others but it was for me,” Sizemore replied. “When I went to Sarah Scott I was at the top of my class in Algebra. I was so good that I did not have homework.

“My mother was the kind of parent who would say, ‘Oh, you don’t have homework? Well, there is something wrong here!’ We did not have a car and we did not have car fare so we walked all the way from our house (at 720 S. 13th St.) to Sarah Scott.

“And my mother walked right in and asked the teacher: ‘Why doesn’t she have homework?’ And the teacher said ‘She turns in her homework everyday!’ So my mother said, ‘Where is she doing it? She’s not doing it at home!’

“Then, someone said, ‘The class is too easy (for her)!’ I could have made my mother disappear. She said, ‘Well, take her out of this class and put her in a harder class!’

“My new teacher was Miss Essie Hubbell, a white lady with red hair. She gave me the hardest work you could find but she was a helpful teacher. She would help you so I did well in her class.”

Barbara did well in all school subjects, graduating from Wiley in January 1944, shortly after her 16th birthday, as class valedictorian and president of the National Honor Society.

Her father was not there to celebrate her accomplishments. Sylvester and Delila divorced in December 1934. And, on Dec. 12, 1936, Sy was shot and killed by a deputy sheriff who attempted to serve a warrant on him for non-support.

Delila married Aldwin E. Stewart in 1940.

When asked about her father, Barbara usually explained that he “died in an accident.” Some biographers have concluded Sy was “killed in an auto crash.”

Fluent in Latin, Barbara received the Maude G. Reynolds Classical Languages Scholarship to Northwestern University and returned to Evanston.

Though she experienced bias in Terre Haute at lunch counters and motion picture theaters, it was nothing like the prejudice she confronted in Evanston. She detested the city and the university though she earned a bachelor’s in classical languages there followed by an master’s in elementary education in 1954.

Black students were not permitted to live on the Northwestern campus so Barbara helped form an activist group. Her mother came to Evanston to pull her off a picket line, urging her to “get a college degree first and fight for civil rights later.”

Continued to next week.