

A Favorite Son: A Tribute to Kenneth Wright Jr.

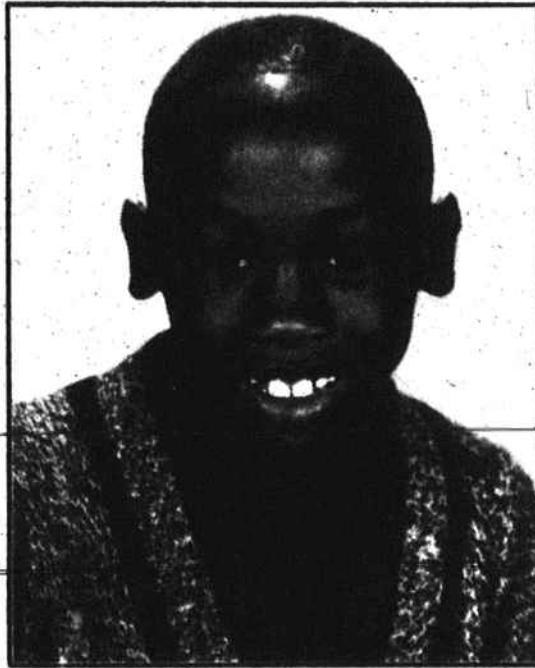
"This is Kenny," said Mr. Hampton, with that good humor that is a necessity if you spend your days surrounded by kindergartners. He looked down at three feet worth of little boy. "I'm sure you'll get along just fine."

I was not at all sure, but I was not alone. Several people in my neighborhood had resolved to help the local school - Winston-Salem's Latham Elementary - pull itself up by the bootstraps. Latham's reputation was such that it was avoided by parents from our relatively comfortable neighborhood, who could afford to send their children to private school or drive them across town to "alternative" schools. Latham was abandoned in a thicket of statistics.

Most of us are familiar with the lamentable shape of American education. Southerners face the added bitter truth that as bad as things are in the nation, in the South they are worse. According to a recent study by BellSouth Foundation, Alabama is the only southern state that beats the national high school graduation rate, an unimpressive 71.2 percent. And among those southern graduates going on to college, the foundation adds, one of four still needs remedial reading and writing classes and one of every three needs remedial work in math.

Those problems begin in elementary classrooms crowded with too many children whose parents were themselves poor students. One modest solution is to help out, so there I was, signing in as a volunteer in the foyer of Roland H. Latham Elementary School. A time-darkened portrait of the late Mr. Latham brooded down on me from the cinder-block wall. I'll bet he didn't get a lot of back-talk.

The school was built in 1957. Its design in one-story brick with corrugate metal breezeways, painted dark brown: Fifties Functional. Back then, Latham School was among stable neighborhoods. In the last generation, however, "progress" has brought a four-lane, strip-zoned boulevard lined with apartment houses. Because so many families in the area live in apartments, half of Latham's 425 pupils will



Kenneth William Wright Jr.

arrive during the school year, and half will depart. Seventy-three percent of Latham's children qualify for free or reduced-cost meals.

Kenny, who is black, does not fit the profile implied by those statistics. He is from a two-parent family and has the good fortune to have three older brothers who have introduced him to the rudiments of reading and math. He arrives at school in clean, even starched clothes.

Kenny's problem was that he was shy. His eyes, on the rare occasions that he raised them, were bright, ready to learn, but he almost always kept his gaze on his shoetops. And shyness is a dangerous characteristic in our society, especially if you are black. Shyness risks giving the impression you are dumb - not that you are embarrassed to say the answer, but that you don't know the answer. This is a glad-hand, look-'em-in-the-eye society, and the child with lowered eyes and halting speech can be thought of as ignorant, even by his own teachers. No matter how smart Kenny might be, Mr. Hampton explained, he was painting himself into a corner if he did not gain confidence.

I had no idea how to begin, so I stuck with tradition. My father, who grew up in

Greensboro, N.C., was schooled by the old method of recitation. That is a technique spurned today by educators who can not seem to prioritize its parameters, so, naturally, they do not dialogue about it. I tried it anyway. My father knew more poetry than any Ed. D. I have ever met.

I decided on "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer, a poem I stumbled through in Mrs. Oakley's sixth grade. I had long since forgotten the words - though Mrs. Oakley's perfume haunts me to this day - but with the aid of an anthology, I got Kenny started. We might have gone on that way forever had it not been for Will.

Will, with light blue eyes, sandy hair and a smile that could light a dark room, saw me off with Kenny one day and asked, "Why can't I go, too?" Neither Mr. Hampton nor I could think fast enough, so along came Will, a walking, constantly talking, bundle of self-confidence.

Will, in fact, was off the wall. He jumped into my assignments with both feet. The problem with Will was that he wanted to do everything at once. So he finished nothing. For Will, a schoolroom is a mass of distractions. Kenny was much too serious to be distracted.

So, when I made alphabet cards and raced them against each other, Will would start, discover the travel posters on the wall, examine the penmanship examples - look at everything except his assignment. Kenny never wavered.

Teachers call this being "on task." In the workplace, for example, you see Wills and Kennys everywhere. The Wills are describing what they are going to do to anyone who will listen. The Kennys are doing it.

Everytime I raced Kenny against Will, Kenny got to Z before Will got past M. Sometimes Will got only to L. It was the same with "Trees." Kenny might have been the only kindergartner in America to memorize all six stanzas of that chestnut. Will had trouble concentrating.

What Will provided, however, was his free spirit. He taught Kenny to laugh. Will's acute sense of the hilarity of life would not let him bet past the line,

"against the earth's sweet flowing breast' without dissolving in red-faced laughter. Kenny either did not get it, or, if he did, was much too serious to let on. Will snickered, laughed, blushed and once, when we were sitting on a hill outside, threw himself backward with such jocular force that he did a backward somersault.

At first it bothered me to lose control. But Will, having discovered the ease with which a backward somersault could be accomplished on the hill, soon taught Kenny. Then under utter disregard for the sacred memory of Joyce Kilmer, their gymnastic took over.

When I finally corralled them, we worked our way to the penultimate stanza: "Upon whose bosom snow has lain." In the interest of cultural literacy, I had to explain, and Will was off again, giggling and parading about the room.

By the end of the year, before spring's warm sun melted away all hope of discipline, Kenny was prompting Will though a relatively error-free recitation. Kenny had become the tutor. All three of us did acceptable backward somersaults.

On my last visit of the year, Mr. Hampton took me aside to show me "books" the children had made, about their dogs, their cats, their Ninja Turtles. Kenny's book was about me. Embarrassed, I opened it and read, through blurred vision, to the end, where Kenny concluded, simply: "He is my friend."

I am still working with Kenny, who is demonstrating that a first grader can handle Tennyson - "Alone and warming his five wits/The own in the belfry sits" - while looking straight in the eye.

Jerome Adams was Kenneth Wright's tutor and "friend."

(Editor's note: This article on Kenneth "Kenny" William Wright Jr. was published earlier this year in a Chicago publication called AIM. It is being reprinted here with permission. Kenny, 9, was struck by a vehicle and killed on his way to his bus stop on Aug. 30.)

You Can Not

You cannot strengthen the weak
by weakening the strong;
You cannot help small men
by tearing down big men.
You cannot help the poor
by destroying the rich.
You cannot lift the wage
earner
by pulling down the
wage payer.
You cannot keep out of
trouble
by spending more than your
income.
You cannot further the brother-
hood of man

by inciting class hatreds.
You cannot establish security
on borrowed money.
You cannot build character and
courage
by taking away a man's
initiative and independence.
You cannot help men perman-
ently
by doing for them what they
could
and should do themselves.

— Abraham Lincoln

"Why Dear God, Why?"

"Why dear God, Why?"
One tear drop lasts a lifetime,
for one second worth of crime.
A black cloud hovers over the sky,
Where a young child is left to die.
Mother is yelling, why dear, God Why,
Why you ask, Listen to her lifeless' cry.
For no real reason,
has God chosen this season.
As a child lies in pain,
there is knowledge here in gain.
One tear drop lasts a lifetime,
for one second worth of crime.

—Shana

