

Evelyn "Lebbie" Sellers celebrates her 90th birthday with family and friends

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"I feel just like I've always felt, no different," said Evelyn "Lebbie" Sellers of her 90th birthday. "I think age is just a state of mind."

She and her husband, Augustus King Sellers, have a simple recipe for long life: "Be good to yourself. Go to bed at night, and eat plenty of fresh vegetables."

Sellers was born in Winston-Salem on July 10, 1909, to the Rev. Kenneth R. and Vandelia Perry Williams. Sellers was the oldest of three children, including her brother, the late Rev. Kenneth R. Williams Jr., and her sister, Gwendolyn Johns. Kenneth R. Williams Jr. was the chancellor of Winston-Salem State University for 16 years beginning in 1961 and the former pastor of First Institutional Baptist Church in 1942 before it became United Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church in 1965. Sellers is still a member of this church.

Surrounded by family, friends, church members, former neighbors and former piano students, and students from her musical kindergarten, Sellers enjoyed an outdoor lawn party in her honor. Arranged by her

son, Walter "Doc" Farabee, and his wife, Carolyn, the gathering attracted more than 75 guests to Farabee's home on Bethabara Road last Saturday.

"I'm sorry it rained," said Farabee. "But the spirit of the thing did not die. Even though some sat in the car until the rain subsided, they came. This is the first time in 90 years that I have given her such a celebration. I thought it would be something to honor her since she reached that milestone. Her 90th birthday! I can't think of anything better than that."

Farabee counts his blessings daily, as he has both his parents with him during his own golden years. His children, Jay, Chris, Darlis and Walter, and great-grandchildren, Chris Jr., Camris and Brianna, were all smiles about the affair.

"I am in my sixties. At the age I am, many of my friends' parents have long gone. We are most honored to have her among us," Farabee said.

Guests came bearing gifts, loaded envelopes, happy hearts and well wishes.

"You are good for sore eyes," said a longtime friend. "Both of you are still looking good."

The Sellers were joined by two

former neighbors who are 92 years of age - Mozell Miller and Ethel Brady. Her pastor, the Rev. J. W. Ballard, and his wife shared a laugh with Sellers at the gathering.

"She's my buddy. I love her to death. She has a great sense of humor," he said. "Sister Sellers is to me like a cornerstone in our church. She was here when I came in 1959 and has always been here. She has been one of the pillars, one of the persons I depended on heavily in establishing the worship of the church, and she is a tremendous musician," he said.

Her sister, Gwendolyn Johns, said, "Evelyn has always been a good singer. She started out wanting to be a country singer, but she knew they had a hard road."

Ballard described the spirit-filled cantatas that Sellers presented for Easter, Christmas and other special occasions. A famed contralto, Sellers directed the Senior Choir at the church for 23 years. Gladys Watson, a church member, has always loved to hear Sellers perform the solos "How Great Thou Art," and "If I Can Help Somebody" during revivals and special services.

Music has long been the center of Seller's joy. She served as owner and operator of the Jack & Jill Musical Kindergarten for 35 years. Having studied music at Talledega College, Sellers trained with the following voice coaches: Dicie Howell of Winston-Salem; Lula Ver Childress Howard; Robert Weigstec of Steinway Hall in New York; and Emma Otero of Carnegie Hall. As a soloist, she has performed at many concerts and churches.

Sellers described the atmosphere at Talledega College as "very polished. In those days we dressed for class in the morning. There were no jeans. Lord, no jeans. We did not know what jeans were. We even wore our gloves and dresses to concerts," she said. "They need to go back to that. Now, when you dress, you think, 'Some of these kids with their pants off their backsides, I don't know what they are thinking about.'"

At Talledega, the students changed their clothes three times a day. When they went to supper, they would change clothes again. At that time, there were no scholarships, but Sellers and her brother and sister all went to college.



Evelyn "Lebbie" Sellers received assistance from grandson Walter Farabee Jr. in blowing out the candles on her cake during her 90th birthday celebration.

"All of us went to college, including our mom and dad," she said.

Her mother, Vandelia Johns, was an accomplished pianist who practiced and performed regularly. When musical artists would come to Winston-Salem and needed someone to play the piano, Johns was often called.

"The committee would come and get her. That inspired me to want to play as a child. Now, that's a little ancient history," she said. "I have spent more than 60 years in music."

When Sellers left Talledega, she went on to do concert work. She even had a course in Carnegie Hall.

"I had some good coaches. We always did warm-up exercises and followed with assigned songs in different languages. I would stay on a song until I got it right. Those musicians crank it. You don't play with them," she said.

Sellers instilled the same kind of motivation in the children she taught at her music studio, Evelyn Williams Studio, which was located at 11th and Gray avenues, and at the Jack and Jill Musical Kindergarten.

Rochelle Brandon, now a gynecologist, was one of Sellers' piano students in the sixth grade, and she attended Jack and Jill. Brandon took piano lessons with other students

from United Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church, which included Derrick Ballard, the pastor's son.

"She was a lot of fun, and she taught us many songs like 'Jesus Loves the Little Children,' and 'He Has the Whole World in His Hands,'" Brandon said.

Brandon recalled one of Sellers' former students, Rochelle Joyner, who went on to the N.C. School of the Arts and is still a classical pianist.

Natalie Kimbrough Summers took piano lessons under Sellers along with other African Americans in the Bethania and Old Town communities.

"She got the whole community involved. My dream was for her to play for my wedding, but I waited so long it was not possible," she said.

Ruth Ledbetter, the mother of Yvette Hatcher, worked with Sellers at Jack and Jill.

"Sellers and I have been friends for a long time, and she was wonderful to work with," Ledbetter said.

"If we had more teachers like Mrs. Sellers, we wouldn't have all of the problems in schools we have today. More of them would learn discipline, math, reading, social skills, listening skills. She was caring, loving and patient - everything a good edu-

cator should be," Hatcher said.

Ida Ruth Staplefoote was Sellers' neighbor many years ago.

"Sellers is one my good neighbors. We would call each other across the fence, and she would give me some of their fresh vegetables from their garden," she said.

A poster of Seller's life was on display. It included photographs of her involvement with the Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, The Evelyn Williams Choral Society, the Senior Choir and The Book Club of Today and hobbies such as reading, doing ceramics, crocheting, growing flowers and cooking. Several members of the book club attended the gathering: Maybelle Hedgeley, Selina Nichols, Doris Hartsfield and Barbara Hayes.

Louise Smith, president of The Book Club of Today, described Sellers as "the only legacy of our club."

"Her mother was one of the charter members of the club, and Mrs. Williams taught me music. Sellers is right there with us in the book club, and she serves on the music committee. She is a citizen who has made great contributions to the community. I remember her musical radio program and her working with the YWCA. She is really something to sing about," Smith said.



The Rev. and Mrs. J.W. Ballard, of United Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church, congratulated Evelyn "Lebbie" Sellers on her 90th birthday celebration.

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