

Rosa Parks honored at birthday celebration, movie premiere

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DETROIT — Rosa Parks, whose act of defiance made her a heroine in the Civil Rights Movement, was honored recently at a gala event celebrating her 89th birthday and the premiere of a movie about her life.

The stars of the made-for-TV movie, "Ride to Freedom: The Rosa Parks Story," spoke briefly before the event.

Angela Bassett, who plays Parks, said she was awestruck the first time she saw her.

"I never thought perhaps that one day they'll do a story of her life and I'll get to play it," said Bassett, who starred in "How Stella Got Her Groove Back" and "What's Love Got to Do With It," the story of Tina Turner's life.

"The Rosa Parks Story," which will air on CBS Feb. 24 during Black History Month, also stars Cicely Tyson as Parks' mother.

Parks was not present for the news conference but was to attend the screening later Monday night.

Tyson wished Parks a happy birthday and said, "No one understands the strength of silent power. ... Her silence spoke."



Bassett

"Because she spoke in the manner that she did, today we all have our rights," Tyson said.

The film chronicled Parks' life beginning from when she was a girl in Montgomery, Ala. It was directed by Julie Dash, whose previous films include "Daughters of the Dust" and "Love Song."

Dash said doing the movie was the "highlight of my life and my career."

Rather than choosing to direct the movie, "I feel like this film chose me," she said.

Parks, then a seamstress in Montgomery, was headed home more than 46 years ago when she was arrested for refusing to give up her bus



Rosa Parks walks up courthouse steps in Montgomery, Ala., in 1956. When Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man in 1955, she changed the course of civil rights.

seat to a white person. Her arrest led to the Montgomery bus boycott. Parks now lives in Detroit.

Bassett and actor Peter

Francis James, who plays Parks' husband, Raymond, talked about how Parks inspired them.

"Heroes come from unlikel-

ly places," James said. "Rosa Parks was a hero from an unlikely place."

The event was sponsored by the Rosa and Raymond

Parks Institute for Self-Development and the Detroit Institute of Art. Proceeds from the event went to the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute.

Schools

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taxes to support education — particularly that of Negroes — various groups also founded private schools for elementary and high school age students (unknown terms in those days). The AMA was one of the most prominent. By 1900, it had seven outstanding graded schools for African Americans located from the North Carolina coast to the Piedmont. For example, Peabody Academy in Troy was founded in 1880 and as late as the 1920s was the only black high school for Montgomery, Randolph, Anson, Stanly, Richmond and Moore counties. African Americans educated in AMA schools also opened private normal and "ungraded" schools for their people.

Over time, some of these schools evolved into preparatory schools for historically black colleges and universities. These included Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama; Morehouse and Spelman colleges in

Atlanta; Howard University in Washington, D.C.; Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee; Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach and of course N.C. Agricultural and Technical University in Greensboro, St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, N.C. Central University in Durham and others. The prep schools offered the same college preparatory courses as in white schools, such as English composition, algebra, history, and foreign languages. Nor were they cheap; back in the 1940s these schools charged up to \$500 per academic year for tuition, room and board.

From their earliest days, these black prep schools also offered domestic, industrial and manual study. At Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, N.C., Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown became famous for her mandatory classes on manners. Believing that cultured people were better able to overcome racial prejudice, in 1940 she even published a book titled "The Correct Thing to Say, to Wear,

to Do." During Brown's tenure at Palmer, more than 90 percent of its students went on to college and 64 percent pursued post-graduate degrees.

With the coming of integration to Southern schools, the need for black prep schools began to trail off.

Palmer Memorial closed its doors in 1971, after having prepared more than a thousand young African Americans to continue their education and take their places in society. As outdated as "colored" water fountains and the image of slavery promoted by "Gone With the Wind," black prep schools now live only in the memories of their former students. Palmer was reopened as the Charlotte Hawkins Brown State Historic Site in 1987.

For further information call (336) 449-4876, e-mail chb@ncmail.net or go to the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources Web site, www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/sections/hs/chb/hb.htm.



Faculty and students of the Palmer Memorial Institute

N.C. Division of Archives and History

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