

Farrakhan: World at war because Christians, Muslims and people of other faiths are divided

Continued from 5B

Congressman John Conyers, a Michigan Democrat; Russell Simmons, hip-hop pioneer and entrepreneur; and Joe Shirley Jr., Navajo Nation president.

Nation founder Wallace D. Fard attracted black Americans on the margins of society with a message of self-improvement and separation from whites, who he said were inherently evil because of their enslavement of blacks.

The Nation of Islam, which promotes black empowerment and nationalism, was rebuilt by Farrakhan in the late 1970s after W.D. Mohammed, the son of longtime leader Elijah Mohammed, moved his followers toward main-

stream Islam.

Farrakhan became notorious for calling Judaism a "gutter religion" and suggesting crack cocaine might have been a CIA plot to enslave blacks. He met with foreign leaders at odds with the United States — Moammar Gadhafi, Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein — prompting the State Department in 1996 to accuse him of "cavorting with dictators."

Farrakhan, who embraced W.D. Mohammed on stage in 2000 after years of discord, has credited his steps toward reconciliation to what he called a "near death" experience related to prostate cancer, which he began battling in 1991.

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Aldridge, who described herself as spiritual but not a member of the Nation, welcomed Farrakhan and what he had to say.

"This message is something everybody needs to hear—a message that's universal," Aldridge said. "... What he said was critical for our lives today."

Farrakhan recalled the story of the final message delivered by the Prophet Muhammad, who was dying at the time. "Within 80 days, he expired," Farrakhan said.

"I don't see expiring for me," he said, "but I do see exaltation."

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Invitation to integrate made history at tiny N.C. junior college

Continued from 5B

Listening was Billy Edd Wheeler, about to start his final year at Warren Wilson. He was brilliant and athletic, a popular campus leader who later became an award-winning country music songwriter.

But he knew what it meant to be a misfit—born poor and illegitimate in a West Virginia coal camp and sent to Warren Wilson four years earlier to appease an unloving stepfather. The question of accepting this stranger struck at his heart.

"I had that ingrained in me, that I could never be better than anybody else," Wheeler said. "I think that was part of it, being able to empathize."

Lail, too, was moved by a childhood spent in the company of black sharecroppers on his family's farm who cared for him as his mother began a slide into mental illness.

"They were very good to me, fed me, I thought, 'Why do we treat these people so bad?'" he said. "I thought, 'This should be changed.'"

The vote was 54-1 to accept Shippy. He began classes at Warren Wilson Junior College in the fall of 1952.

After the first few days, his presence drew little attention on campus that already housed students from China, Cuba, Europe and South America, Wheeler said.

"It sort of settled into just a routine of life and you didn't think much about it," Wheeler said. "But for the people here in the valley, it was a pretty big deal."

At night, the college phone rang through to Bannerman's home. His 11-year-old daughter, Mary — now Wheeler's wife—fielded a couple of calls offering the traditional slur for whites who befriended blacks.

It was "scary, and proud," she recalled. "I can wear that badge of honor."

Classmates did, too. Shippy later told the Asheville Citizen-Times about going to an ice cream parlor in the Swannanoa community with a group of students.

"They sat me in the middle of the booth and that just did not work," he recalled in a 1994 interview. "(The manager) said, 'We can't serve you. You can get it to go and take it outside.' I had a hard time convincing the students not to tear up the place."

Instead, they all left.

The college tried to downplay Shippy's presence. Bannerman was friends with the editor of the Asheville newspaper and asked him to keep it quiet "for safety, for Alma's safety and the students' safety," Mary Bannerman Wheeler said.

The first newspaper story about the school's integration appeared in September 1955. By then, Warren Wilson had five black students and its first black graduate, Georgia Powell, who had earned her associate's degree that spring. And by then, Shippy was long gone; he left after one year, to make some money for his family, his brother Michael said.

He joined the Army, then moved to Indiana, where he married and fathered two girls. Except for occasional correspondence with a few friends, Shippy vanished from Warren Wilson life until 1987.

Then, his marriage over, he returned to the Swannanoa Valley to care for his aging grandmother, going to work at a state-run long term care facility. He again became active in his church and enthusiastically backed local youth sports teams, sitting behind the umpire at Little League games so he could cheer for both sides.

That's where Rodney Lytle first encountered the stranger who had a silent, but major impact on his life. A friend nudged him and pointed to Shippy. "He's one of you," she said.

Lytle was confused. He had two cousins who attended Warren Wilson in 1959 and knew blacks had gone there for years, well before it became a four-year college in 1967, well before he met his wife there, earned his degree, got his job.

But he had never seen this older man or heard the name Alma Shippy. He walked over and struck up a conversation, "and from that moment on we were friends."

Lytle became Shippy's champion, determined not only to commemorate his accomplishment, but to help him live a more comfortable life.

Though Warren Wilson had long required students to complete service projects to graduate, no one had done anything to help its first black alumnus.

A pair of students organized a crew to fix Shippy's house. In 1994, the college included Shippy in the centennial celebration of its original farm school. And eight years later, on the 50th anniversary of his enrollment, the board of trustees passed a proclamation honoring Shippy, Bannerman, Lail, Jensen and all those involved.

Shippy had prepared a three-page speech, but when he stood to read it, the pages rattled in his shaking hands, Lytle said. He took his seat again and began to cry.

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