

BRYANT SERVED 38 YEARS

Cedar Grove Chapter Honors Beloved 'Mr. NAACP'

BY TERRY POPE

As president of the Cedar Grove Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for the past 38 years, Jesse A. Bryant has been called a lot of things.

He doesn't mind being called Mr. NAACP, an affectionate nickname that also appears on his auto tag.

Because of failing health, Bryant gave up the presidency in January. His friends and family held an appreciation service recently to honor him for his many years of helping blacks in Brunswick County.

In 1952, Bryant became head of the local chapter at a time when it was unpopular to be labeled a black leader. Racial segregation caused bitter struggles in the South. Blacks and whites did not drink from the same public water fountains, share the same bus seats, dine at the same restaurants or use the same public restrooms.

"I will never be able to fill his shoes," said the Rev. M.C. Herring, pastor of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church. Herring succeeded Bryant as chapter president.

Bryant's resume is dotted with victories. Battles to open racially closed doors were often won.

It was his complaint filed with the U.S. Attorney General's office that opened the doors to blacks at the Longwood Grill about 25 years ago. Restaurants should serve customers without regard to race, creed or skin color, he argued. It was one of numerous local confrontations that followed the famous sit-in at a Greensboro lunch counter, where black students from N.C. A&T State University were arrested for refusing to leave an all-white establishment.

"He also brought a major industry to its knees," said Velma Williams, referring to a 1975 court decision that awarded 30 blacks in Brunswick County over \$30,000 from Brunswick Electric Membership Corp.

It was Bryant's lawsuit that ordered a review of hiring practices at the federally-funded cooperative. He argued that blacks were not being hired in proportion to white employees. The complaint opened jobs for linemen, truck drivers, secretaries, tellers and seats on the board of directors.

"Often, he left behind his family to help someone else," said Herring.

For more than 40 years, he has been married to the former Eva Mae Fullwood. They have four children, Lt. Col. James K. Bryant, Staff Sgt. Rosa Lee Bryant, Capt. Mildred Roster and Ceresta Bryant.

"He is an avid reader and he reads good stuff," said his son, James. "He has read every piece of civil rights legislation. He can even tell you what the results would have been had the arguments on either side been differ-



LONGTIME PRESIDENT of the Cedar Grove Branch of the NAACP, Jesse Bryant (right) receives a plaque from the Rev. M.C. Herring, who succeeded him as chapter president.

STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

ent. There have been few times in my life when I've seen him that he had not just finished reading or was getting ready to read."

His favorite writers are Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver and Frederick Douglass. Family members gave him a framed portrait of Douglass at the appreciation service.

Despite joining a church late in life, Bryant has always read The Bible. Often, he would return home on Sundays to tell the family that the pastor left out a word when reciting Scripture. He entered the first grade at Cedar Grove Elementary School having already learned to read, but only made it to the third grade.

Times were not always easy then or later, but

Bryant was a strong provider for his family, said James. "We did not wear Reeboks or Nikes, but we still wore good shoes," said James. "There was no doubt over when it was time to go to bed either."

Bryant attended marches, meetings, conferences, wrote letters and made phone calls during those 38 years. He had served in the U.S. Army and was on the crew that helped build Sunny Point Military Ocean Terminal near Southport. But seeing racial injustice around him, he couldn't rest. "Freedom is not free," he would tell blacks.

"I know him as a person that has stood up for equality of all people," said James. "He is a great contributor to the NAACP. In fact, that has been his life. He lived it."

Bryant has faced disappointment, humiliation and ridicule, said Joe Butler, education chairperson for the Cedar Grove NAACP.

Education for blacks has always taken a backseat, said Butler, but warriors like Bryant have helped to place educational goals within the reach of young blacks today.

"He has given more than he will ever receive on this earth," said Butler, "but God will reward him in heaven."

Delilah Blanks, assistant professor of social work at UNC-Wilmington, said she is a product of and beneficiary of Bryant's struggle to improve educational opportunities for blacks. She is a member of the Bladen County Board of Commissioners and has a doctorate in public health from UNC-Chapel Hill.

"It goes without question that Jesse Bryant is a leader, an organizer, a supporter, a civil rights activist and a person extraordinaire," said Ms. Blanks. "He refused to be trampled on, but stood up and took action for what is fair, right and equal for all citizens."

In her mind, Ms. Blanks said, her mentor will take a seat in the imaginary Social Justice Hall of Fame, distinguishing himself as a "great spiritual architect, a builder and an educator."

"He has become an institution in this community," she said. "The principles for which he stood for were in the face of stress and hatred. His work will never be forgotten."

Often, even blacks left his side.

"He's had a hard time in these years that he's been at bat," said Ms. Blanks, "but he refused to give up. He batted away after so-called black leaders refused to support him."

His legacy, his life work, now depends on another generation of blacks, she told listeners. "The challenge is upon us."

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