

African American achievers with roots in the Oliver Springs region

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 12, 2024)

The theme of the Tri-County African American Cultural Museum in Oliver Springs, which opened in March and had its grand opening on Aug. 3, is "Road to Freedom: Past, Present, and Future." It starts with the story of museum founder Julia Hopper Daniel's great-great grandmother, who was enslaved at birth in 1845 through 1865, spending the last 10 years of her enslavement on farmland where Julia lives.

An apt description of the museum's purpose might be the African proverb cited by Julia, who is passionate about historical preservation: "Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." One of her messages in the talks she gives is that "you should tell your own history and not wait for others to write or tell your story."

African Americans make up only about 3% of the Oliver Springs population of more than 3,300, but this new museum complements the Oliver Springs Historical Society in telling the history of almost all people in the town, as well as African Americans who have lived elsewhere in Anderson, Roane and Morgan counties, a small part of which Oliver Springs occupies. In this article, Carolyn Krause provides information on some of the past and present African Americans highlighted in the museum.

Jo Ann Boyce, an Oliver Springs native, was one of 12 African American students who broke the color barrier and integrated nearby Clinton High School in 1956. As Jo Ann Allen Boyce, she co-authored the award-winning 2019 book "The Promise of Change: One Girl's Story in the Fight for School Equality."

It tells the story of the turmoil caused among students and townspeople by interfering outside agitators. The children's book won several awards, including the 2019 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Nonfiction, a Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Honor and A Kirkus Reviews Best Book of the Year.

In 2023 Oliver Springs native Charles Boyd, who played on the Oak Ridge Bombers baseball team, was presented with a proclamation by Rev. Derrick Hammond, member of the Oak Ridge City Council. It states that November has been declared to be Oak Ridge Bombers Month in the city of Oak Ridge. Both men were featured in a front-page photograph in The Oak Ridger.

The museum's building project manager is the Rev. David Benjamin, pastor of Little Leaf Missionary Baptist Church in Oliver Springs. On Jan. 30, 2020, at the State Capitol in Nashville, he was designated Chaplain of the Day by Cameron Sexton, speaker of the House of Representatives for the 111th General Assembly of the state of Tennessee. He was cited in the proclamation for his "outstanding service and dedication to the state, and extraordinary interest in governmental processes."

A photo in the museum shows a teacher standing with children sitting in front of the Chester Benjamin International Academy in Liberia. The school was built in the name of David's father, the late Rev. Chester Benjamin. The C.B. Helping Hands Ministries, founded in 2006 in Oliver Springs and New Mexico to honor the enduring legacy of the late Rev. Chester Benjamin and Sister Dorothy Benjamin, provides services in Ghana and Liberia.

The ministry builds schools, provides scholarships, offers vocational training, provides free medical care and health education, installs wells and water filtration systems and distributes food to combat malnutrition.

Elizabeth Stallings, a native of Oliver Springs and a student in Mayme Carmichael's one-room elementary school, became an outstanding nurse and director of nurses. She worked briefly for the Methodist Medical Center of Oak Ridge.

As a registered nurse she received extensive training at Cornell University on transplanting kidneys and using dialysis to cleanse the blood of patients lacking normal kidney function. She was recognized for

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initiating the training of spouses of dialysis patients to administer dialysis at home, saving families considerable travel and waiting time involved in transporting patients to dialysis centers frequently for the life-saving procedure.

Carolyn Bush Roddy, a college and professional basketball player who grew up in Oliver Springs, was selected and inducted in March 2024 as a member of the Tennessee Community College Athletic Association Hall of Fame. She played basketball at Roane County High School and Hiwassee College in Madisonville, where she earned All-American accolades.

Upon graduation from Wayland Baptist College in Texas, she was a member of the 1975 Pan American team, which earned the Gold Medal at the 1975 Pan American Games. She played basketball professionally for the Dallas Diamonds of the Women's Professional Basketball League. Later, she became an assistant women's basketball coach at Roane State Community College in Harriman and then the head women's basketball coach at Hiwassee College and at Knoxville College.

Clarence "King Pleasure" Beeks was a popular jazz vocalist and an early master of "vocalese," singing words to a well-known instrumental solo. A native of Oakdale in Morgan County, King Pleasure first achieved popularity with his recording of "Moody's Mood for Love" based on a 1949 James Moody saxophone solo to "I'm in the Mood for Love." Pleasure's 1952 recording is considered a jazz classic. He was cited as a major influence on other well-known singers. He died in Los Angeles.

Abigail (Gail) Hopper Brown, a native of Oliver Springs, was an educator in the Oak Ridge School System. She is Julia Daniel's older sister. Both Gail and Julia were taught for eight years by Mayme Carmichael at the Oliver Springs Colored School.

Gail, who was valedictorian in her high school senior class, graduated with a B.S. degree in business administration and an M.S. degree in education from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. From 1969 to 2001, she worked at ORHS as a business education teacher who taught economics and technology.

Gail's daughter is Molly Brown, a graduate of ORHS and Northwestern University, who serves as the deputy program manager for the New START Treaty within the U.S. Navy Strategic Systems Programs command. In her Navy national security job, she told Benita Albert in an Historically Speaking column in October 2022, "I stumbled upon the arms control treaties and agreements world with my first job and have stayed in this niche field since. I started working in chemical and biological treaties, eventually working my way to the Compliance Assessment Group."

Her work with the U.S. Navy requires that she render policy advice and oversight on international and domestic laws requiring compliance. Her job involves research, problem solving, travel, communication skills and diplomacy.

Charlene Webster, who attended elementary school in Oliver Springs, majored in cosmetology at the Historic Pearl High School in Nashville and then passed the test to earn a cosmetology license. In 1976 she moved to Oak Ridge and founded and opened Mahogany Hair Designs, one of the first African American salons in the city.

Clarence Fritts was a coal miner who learned how to repair radios and TV sets for Oliver Springs residents. One of his children, Anna Rose Fritts Eskridge, worked for 35 years as a registered nurse at the Methodist Medical Center of Oak Ridge.

Lt. Samuel W. Harper, son of Julia Hopper Daniel's grandfather (William Julian Hopper Sr., a coal miner and railroad worker in Oliver Springs), was a Tuskegee Airman. The Tuskegee Airmen were African American fighter and bomber pilots and military airmen who fought in World War II.

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On my visit to the museum, I met Ronolda Dooley, a cousin of Julia Daniel and daughter of Bronce Odell Griffin. She told me stories about the Griffin family, starting with a sad story about her great-grandfather James Griffin. When Ronolda was asked about whether the three counties had any known lynchings of African Americans (hangings for alleged offenses with or without a legal trial), the answer was that each county had two lynchings.

Ronolda then told the story from oral tradition about James when he was squirrel hunting. He saw a white man aim a gun at him, so in self-defense James shot him in the leg, crippling him. James feared he would be lynched so he left the area and never returned, abandoning his wife Eliza, his daughter Ella Mae (who became a public-school teacher) and son Walter Joe Griffin.

Walter was Ronolda's grandfather, husband of Laura Anna Crozier, father of eight children and a coal miner for more than 40 years. He worked in coal mines in Tennessee's Walden Ridge and in East Kentucky. For a time when he was using a pick and shovel in an underground Windrock Mountain coal mine, he experienced "life in the camps" and his family lived in "designated homes for the colored" on the mountain, Ronolda said.

The Griffin family left Windrock Mountains for more suitable housing in the Oliver Springs area. Walter never owned a car, but he was willing to walk five to eight miles daily to work in a coal mine. He had no more than a third-grade education, but he took pride in teaching himself the 13 x13 multiplication tables while working in a mine (his two children who were college graduates majored in mathematics).

He valued education so much that he entered a walking race from Oliver Springs to the Cas Walker Grocery Store in Knoxville that was established by local merchants in Oliver Springs. He came in second but won enough money to help fund the college education of his daughter Alma.

His son Bronce, father of Ronolda, enrolled in Knoxville College under the GI bill. He was president of his class and graduated summa cum laude with a major in math and chemistry. He taught these subjects at a Virginia high school and then started working at the Tennessee Valley Authority, where he worked as a materials tester at TVA's Kingston Steam Plant; his job involved analyzing samples of delivered coal to measure its physical and chemical properties to determine whether it was suitable when burned to generate electricity.

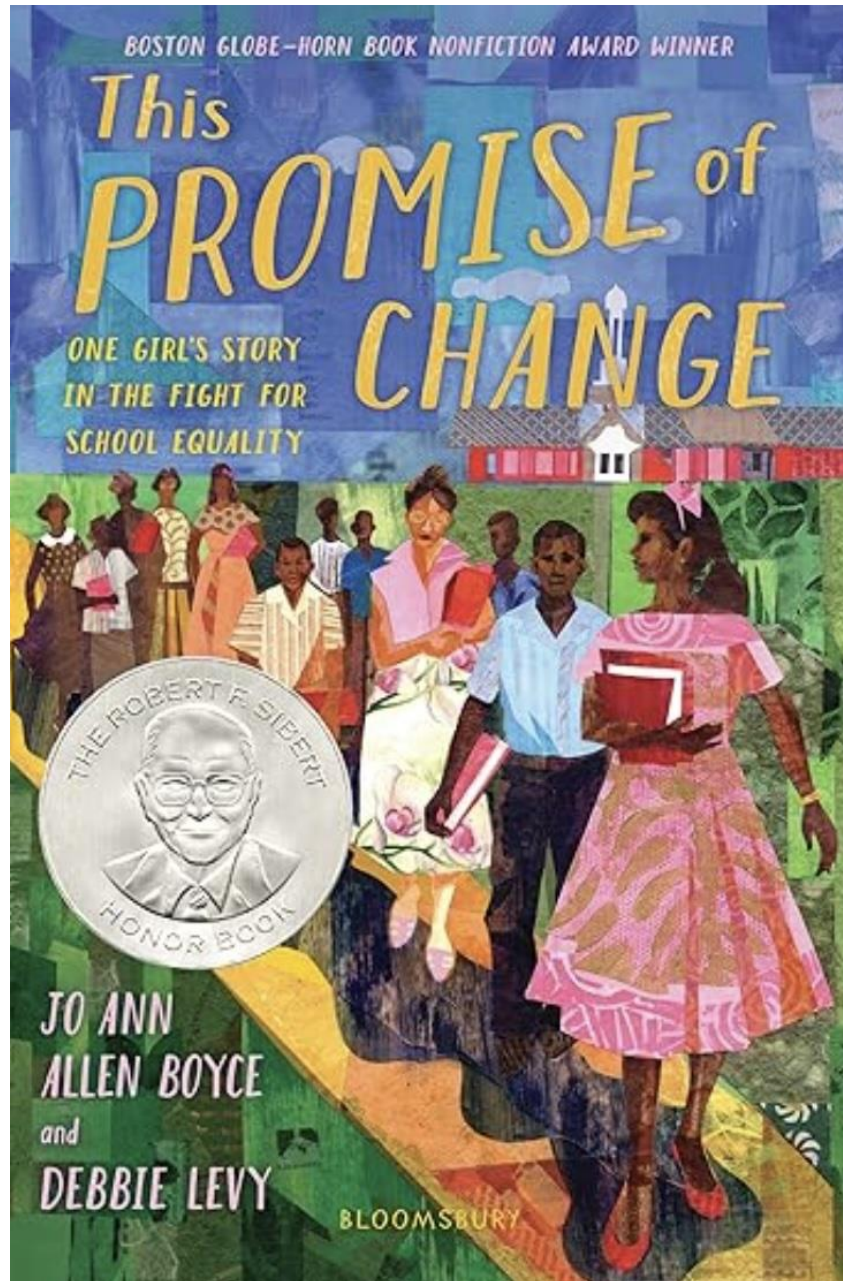
He later worked at TVA's Gallatin Steam Plant as a chemical laboratory analyst. Then he was promoted to chemical engineering associate at Bull Run Steam Plant where he directed the analysis of water samples from various plant sources and called for corrective actions to ensure the water met environmental limits.

According to Ronolda, the value that Walter Joe Griffin placed on education was embraced by his children and grandchildren, many of whom became physicians, lawyers, counselors, educators, chemists, engineers and professional football players. Also, like him, they have been dedicated to supporting their families and churches in various ways.

Thank you, Carolyn, for insights into the newly opened Tri-County African American Cultural Museum.

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Jo Ann Allen Boyce, who grew up in Oliver Springs and was one of the Clinton 12, coauthored this award-winning 2019 children's book "This Promise of Change: One Girl's Story in the Fight for School Equality." (Courtesy the Tri-County African American Cultural Museum in Oliver Springs)

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Julia Hopper Daniel, a founder of the Tri-County African American Cultural Museum in Oliver Springs, spoke recently at a “From the Grassroots Roundtable” panel discussion on “Preserving Places and Stories in the East Tennessee Black Community” at the East Tennessee Historical Society in Knoxville. (Courtesy of Carolyn Krause)



Tri-County African American Cultural Museum (Courtesy of Ray Smith)