

Caring & Concerned At age 72, retired Omaha - Omaha World-Herald (NE) - April 2, 1999 - page 37

April 2, 1999 | Omaha World-Herald (NE) | ALVA JAMES JOHNSON | Page 37

As a boy, Warren Taylor spent summer nights sitting near his grandparents' porch, mesmerized by grown - up conversation.

He listened as his grandfather and other men quoted Scripture and gave their interpretations. He clung to their stories about black heroes like Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey.

As Taylor listened, he learned. And now, 60 years later, the retired Omaha School District principal looks back on such experiences with gratitude.

"Those men weren't high school graduates, but they could quote the Bible verbatim and tell you how to apply it to your life," he said recently. "They always put an emphasis on preparing yourself and getting an education. It's something I've never forgotten."

Today, school administrators, teachers and former students say Taylor's grandfather and his friends would be proud of what he has accomplished since those days on the front porch.

For 21 years, Taylor served as principal of Lothrop Elementary School, successfully leading the staff, children and parents through such challenges as desegregation, building renovations and the day - to - day struggles of inner - city life. He also is credited with the creation of Concerned and Caring Educators (CACE), an organization for black teachers and administrators that has awarded \$250,000 to minority students over the past 10 years.

In February, the organization recognized Taylor for his outstanding leadership at its tenth annual Scholarship Banquet. Larry Heck, Omaha School District assistant superintendent for human resources, said Taylor also has had a significant impact districtwide, serving as an innovative and courageous leader for more than 35 years.

"Throughout his career, teachers and other administrators in the district looked to him for leadership, advice and consultation," Heck said. "I think what came through to people was his helpful, loyal personality. He looked out, not only for his school and his community, but for the greater community and what was best for everyone."

Those who know Taylor best say he's also a man who speaks his mind, which has resulted in many positive changes for the district.

"Don't get the idea that you can run over him because he's a gentleman," said Katherine Fletcher, a friend and retired Omaha School District principal.

Taylor himself admits that he can be very passionate about certain issues.

"One of my many faults is I can't understand why people can't see that something needs to be done and just do it. I usually let them know how I feel."

At age 72, Taylor stands 5 - feet - 10 - inches tall, with salt - and - pepper hair and youthful vigor.

On a recent morning, he arrived at a west Omaha bookstore dressed in a gray sweatshirt, a pair of sunglasses dangling from his neck. He had just finished organ lessons, and had changed an appointment he had to tutor a man through the Literacy Center for the Midlands. The man, who is in his 50s, was a student at Lothrop when Taylor was principal.

A native of Omaha, Taylor has lived here most of his life. When his parents divorced, he moved into his grandparents' home with his mother and sister. He spent mornings and weekends helping his grandfather deliver milk, and he credits his grandparents with the work ethic that led to his success.

After serving in the Navy during World War II, Taylor took advantage of the GI Bill and began taking pre - engineering courses at what was then Omaha University. He changed his major to education because UNO didn't offer an engineering degree, and he couldn't afford to go elsewhere.

He graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1951 and a master's degree in counseling and guidance in 1953.

Taylor said he started his Omaha School District career with an unwanted assignment at **Howard Kennedy Elementary School**. At the time, he was eager to get into secondary education, but black teachers weren't allowed to do student teaching on that level.

So he was given a special education class. Taylor now says the assignment turned out to be a great learning experience, giving him a specialty that landed him summer jobs teaching special education courses at UNO. It also helped him as an administrator.

"Long before anybody thought about mainstreaming special education students, he had them in the classrooms at his school," Heck said.

After teaching at Howard Kennedy, Taylor was transferred to Kellom Elementary School, where he taught for 11 years. Later he served in administrative positions at Lothrop and the district's central offices, eventually becoming principal of Lothrop in 1968.

Those who worked with Taylor during that period said he was particularly helpful to the district when racial strife was at an all - time high nationwide. Before desegregation, Taylor led an effort to create sister schools so white and black children could interact.

At Lothrop School, which was predominantly black at the time, students and staff members said, Taylor used his vision and insight to create a haven for them. Under his leadership, the building was transformed from dilapidation to a modern school. It was the first in the district to have open classrooms, which allowed team teaching.

"It was also the first new building built on the north side for African - American students," said Theodora Meadows, a retired Omaha School District supervisor. "There was pride there, and people enjoyed working at Lothrop school under Mr. Taylor."

Curtis Pruitt, 38, a former Lothrop student, said Taylor was a role model and advocate for the students.

"If he said he was going to do something you could consider it done. He was a positive black male role model in our community, always encouraging us to further our education."

Pruitt, who recently was named regional program director for the Boys Town National Resource and Training Center, said Taylor was one of the people who later encouraged him to pursue a graduate degree at Bellevue University, and who wrote him a letter of recommendation.

"He has always been available and assisted many people with their professional and academic careers," Pruitt said. "Over the years he became a friend, not just a former principal."

Sarpy County Judge Larry Gendler said his late wife, Marilyn, worked as a teacher under Taylor. When she got cancer, Taylor and his late wife, Odessie, provided support and comfort.

Both men have lost their wives to cancer since that time, and they remain friends, working on various projects together. Taylor has made donations in memory of his wife to a scholarship fund Gendler created in memory of Marilyn Gendler. The foundation has awarded \$43,000 in 11 years.

"Quite frankly," Gendler said, "I don't think it would have been as successful as it has been without Warren's support."

During his career, Taylor also taught counseling and guidance courses at Creighton University during the summer and continued to do so after retiring from the Omaha district in 1989.

Former colleagues and friends said Taylor is friendly and personable, often holding social events at his home. It was at one of those gatherings 20 years ago that CACE was born.

The school district had initiated its desegregation program and many black teachers and administrators were feeling isolated working for predominantly white schools. Taylor started holding meetings at his home so the teachers and administrators could support one another.

"Black teachers in white areas weren't always accepted by white parents, teachers and principals," Meadows said. "Mr. Taylor sensed their feelings of isolation and formed an organization where they would feel accepted."

CACE soon grew into an organization that gives scholarships to minority students. The amount of the scholarships awarded has increased from \$250 to \$31,000 per year.

For Taylor, the scholarship program is a direct result of the lessons he learned as a young boy in his grandparents' home. He said he wants to pass those lessons on to the next generation. Taylor has one son, who is an electrical engineer in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"When I was growing up, there was always a strong emphasis on education and preparing yourself for the future," he said. "I want children to know that those values are still important."

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