

Willie Mae Osborn, An Extraordinary Life

On Saturday, April 20, 2024, Mrs. Willie Mae Osborn (née Dailey) died of natural causes 15 days before her 104th birthday. She was devoted to God, a self-described “sharecropper’s daughter,” granddaughter of enslaved people, retired teacher from Arlington County Schools, and wife of the late Deacon Quinton O. Osborn. She was the beloved mother of three sons, grandmother to seven grandchildren—two grandsons and five granddaughters—and great-grandmother to many more. She was a Deaconess of the Greater First Baptist Church of which she had been a member since the early 1950s, and dear friend to countless people from Oklahoma to Washington, D.C.

Born on May 5, 1920 in Hearne, Texas, Mrs. Osborn grew up in McIntosh County, Oklahoma — early in the town of Huttonville, and later in the town of Eufaula. Mrs. Osborn was the ninth of thirteen children, to Mr. William Dailey and Mrs. Loreen Dailey (née Wilson). She was a granddaughter of Mr. Peter Wilson, a formerly enslaved man and woodcutter who suffered a gunshot wound to the face while successfully escaping bondage.

Mrs. Osborn’s family worked as sharecroppers, moving from place to place until they settled in McIntosh County in the mid-1920’s. She attended the Rosenwald School that was built in Huttonville in 1929, walking one and a half miles each way back and forth to class. She was singled out by teachers and staff for her scholastic ability and talent with guiding younger students, building on the confidence provided by her older sister, Rebecca, who was her original inspiration to become a teacher. With New Deal-era programs helping her family through the Depression, Mrs. Osborn later attended high school in Eufaula and, upon graduation and after taking college-level courses offered by Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, she attended Langston University – still the only HBCU in Oklahoma – earning her degree in Elementary Education in 1943.

Mrs. Osborn, a renowned storyteller, would happily recall her first teaching experience to anyone who asked. As a newly minted educator, she was assigned to a remote area of Oklahoma near a town called Hoffman, which was close to the Creek Indian reservation. The housing she was supposed to have lived in had burned down, and for a night she had to sleep in the schoolhouse. She hardly slept a wink. “About midnight,” Mrs. Osborn said, “I heard these wolves howling. I looked through that window and there were five or six of those big things out there in the middle of that road.” She soon found safe housing among the families of the nine children she was to teach — “the nicest kids,” she said — but upon completing the term, she arranged reassignment to a school in Eufaula. “My former principal put me in the second grade there,” Mrs. Osborn said. “And that’s where I taught until Quinton came out of the Army.”

On December 13, 1943, Mrs. Osborn (then Willie Mae Dailey) married Quinton O. Osborn, while he was serving in the United States Army. While in the service, Mr. Osborn had befriended residents of the Washington, DC, area who piqued his interest in attending Howard University. Mrs. Osborn drafted his letter of application to Howard and Mr. Osborn was accepted, where he went to school during the day while working nights. Mrs. Osborn continued to work in Eufaula for a time, visiting Mr. Osborn during semester breaks, after which she moved to Washington, DC permanently.

Their three sons soon arrived, first Oscar in 1944, Reginald in 1952, and Ronald in 1954.

In 1951, the family joined the Greater First Baptist Church of Washington, DC, where Mrs. Osborn became a deaconess and Mr. Osborn, a deacon. As Mrs. Osborn said, "I told the Lord a long time ago that if he kept me on my feet and in my right mind, I would praise him for the rest of my days." Mrs. Osborn was a deeply active member of the church for more than 70 years, including as Sunday School Department Superintendent, alto and soloist in the choir, Baptist Training Union member, and member of the Steering Committee and Anniversary Committee that together organized Greater First Baptist's centennial celebration.

When Mrs. Osborn arrived in Washington, DC, she began employment with the federal government, for which she worked eight years. Then, after service to Greater First Baptist as Sunday School Department Superintendent, Mrs. Osborn was encouraged to apply for a teaching position at Arlington County Schools. On completing just two assignments as a substitute teacher, Mrs. Osborn was taken on permanently as one of the County's first African American teachers and became a widely respected member of the faculty for 13 years, until her retirement in the late 1980s.

Through highs and lows — including the losses of her husband in 1995, and her youngest son Ronald in 2007 — Mrs. Osborn was a light and a rock to family and friends, offering her unparalleled wisdom and warm comfort to all who sought her counsel, always grounded in her deep and abiding faith in an everlasting God.

She ran her race as few others have. Triumphant, she has gone home.

Mrs. Osborn was a member of the Lambda Alpha chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Gideon's Bible Group of Greater Washington, and the Order of the Eastern Star.

Mrs. Osborn was preceded in death by her husband Quinton (d. 1995) and her youngest son Ronald (d. 2007). She is survived by her son, Oscar, and his wife Carolyn, both of Florida, her son Reginald of Maryland; nieces Clarice Baldwin of Wisconsin, Daisy Brown of Washington, DC, Dorothy Davis of Mississippi, Janis Noel of Tennessee, Karen Dailey-Killian of California, Lorraine Brown of Washington, DC, Martha Law of Michigan, Rose Coleman of Tennessee, and nephews Cecil Spivey of Oklahoma, Irving (June) Brown of Minnesota, Lawrence Dailey of California, Nathaniel Dailey of Maryland, Rudolph Martin of California, and Ted Martin of Kansas; granddaughters Catinna Osborn, Denise Dennis, Kimberlee Osborn, and Vonita Osborn of Maryland, and Jessica Osborn and her husband Doug Pennington of Washington, DC; grandson Quinton Osborn, and his wife Danielle, of Maryland and grandson Reggie Osborn Jr., of Oklahoma; great-grandchildren including Alexis Phillip, Baylor Dennis, Christian Moore, Clarke Dennis, Dominic Kelly, Gabrielle Osborn, Karter Brown, Keshara Crippens, London Stancil, Nichele Phillip, Octavia Osborn, Olivia Osborn, Remy Phillip, and Shaun Brown; grandnephew T.J. Brown; great-great grandson Karson Crippens; honorary son Gamailia Jackson, and honorary grandson Rodney "Moon" Lambert.

In lieu of flowers, please send donations in memory of Mrs. Osborn to The Greater First Baptist Church of Washington, DC, Rev. Dr. Winston C. Ridley, Jr., Pastor. (If flowers are preferred, please send a plant in Mrs. Osborn's memory for a garden to be planned by her granddaughters.)

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