

Paying tribute to one of the great ones: Miss Jo Zelma Brown

By Floyd Miller

I was in Hallettsville this past December for a surprise birthday party for my cousin Freddie Miller, who was turning 70. It was a great party, and she was truly honored and surprised.

As the celebration was getting close to the end, we had another guest, Miss Jo Zelma Brown. Miss Brown is the last known surviving teacher from Stevens-Mayo High School, the Black school in Hallettsville. Everyone gathered around her and wanted to take a picture with her.

I want to dedicate this article to Miss Brown and all the Black teachers and other employees who nurtured and took care of us at Stevens-Mayo High School.

Just a little bit about life in Hallettsville in the late 1950s and '60s: Almost everything was separate. For example, our county agent was Black; all of our teachers and principals were Black; the bus drivers, the cafeteria workers and janitors...they were all Black.

In 1958, we entered a brand-new school, and it was named after two Black educators in the area, Mr. Stevens and Professor J. E. Mayo. Getting a new book was a treat, and we did get



Siblings Freddie Miller, left, and James Miller, right, pose for a picture with their former teacher, Jo Zelma Brown, center, at a recent birthday party for Freddie.

them on some occasions. Most of the time, we had hand-me-down books from Hallettsville High School.

Every situation has some pluses and minuses, and today I want to focus on what I considered to be pluses of our school.

We had teachers who loved us and cared about us. Not only did they know us, in most cases they knew our parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles. They backed up what our parents were teaching us. It was not unusual for one of them to say, "I know your parents taught you better than that."

Our teachers lived in the community with us, so there was always some type of interaction. They encouraged all of the students, not just the A and B students. They made us all believe that we could accomplish anything.

They also prepared us for a world beyond Stevens-Mayo by telling us, "You are going to have to be twice as good to get the same job that others get."

Our teachers would also put the paddle on our backside, if necessary, and the smart kids didn't go home and say, "I got a whipping today."

One of our teachers would say, "If you don't learn anything that's going to be your little red wagon." Let me assure you she was not talking about a "red wagon."

We had a daily prayer and pledged allegiance to the flag. In elementary school, we recited a Bible verse.

What about outside of the classroom? Our quarterback was Black; the whole team was. Our cheerleaders were Black, and our homecoming queens were Black. And so were our valedictorians and salutations. And when we went to compete in interscholastic events, we went to Prairie View A&M

a HBCU (Historically Black College or University).

I feel like those 11 years in a segregated school gave me the tools to live the rest of my life. My senior year, I graduated from Hallettsville High School which also proved to be a good experience. However, it was a huge cultural change.

I called Miss Brown on the eve of her 86th birthday to get her historical perspective of teaching in Hallettsville. She said that she taught for 43 years. She was 21 years old when she started teaching, and some of her students were almost as old as she was. A couple students were 19 years old; they helped their parents on the farm, so they were late graduating. She said that she "enjoyed every minute of being a teacher at Stevens-Mayo."

When the schools integrated, she said, "It was tough at first. Sometimes I had more white parents than students in my class. They did not believe a Black person could teach their children."

Miss Brown said, "The Lord blessed me; I was nervous and scared, but I never showed it."

She said that some of the parents went to the principal and superintendent. After getting no satisfac-

tion, they went to the school board. She said they told the school board members that her "teaching was too technical." Miss Brown was a chemistry, biology and physical science teacher.

The superintendent and principal sat in on her classes and said there was nothing wrong with her teaching.

There was times Miss Brown said she wondered if she should "quit and pick cotton."

She was quick to follow that up with, "I was too stubborn to be run off. If I ever left it was going to be my decision."

She said things began to change when the children begin to back her instead of their parents. As she continued to teach, parents began to ask if their children could be in her class. One parent told her, "My son wants to be a doctor, and I believe that you can help him the most."

Five teachers went from Stevens-Mayo to HHS: Miss Jo Zelma Brown, Mr. T.S. Johnson, Mr. Benjamin Lindsay II, Ms. Julia Buntton and Mr. J. B. Polk.

Since retiring, Miss Brown spends her time traveling and serving as a missionary for her church. She

See Miss Brown, Page 9

goes to the church over the lunch hour every day to pray.

Miss Brown is the last living teacher from the Stevens-Mayo era. She played a pivotal role in the life of many students. Here are some of their thoughts. I wish we had room for more.

"Ms. Brown was a challenge to me. One of her favorite sayings was, 'Yawl don't know nothing,' knowing how many grammatical errors there was in that statement. She was constant and steadfast in her teachings, was fair in her assessments and was humble, humorous and sympathetic when she needed to be. I appreciated her then and even more now. Much love for one of the greatest."

— Wimpson Washington

"Miss Brown was a very good science, biology, and chemistry instructor. She had high expectations for all of her students. Every student that had Miss Brown for a teacher knew that they had to study and apply themselves in order to pass her class. She would stay after school and help students learn the information. She was truly concerned about her students and had the respect of the students and was a very classy lady."

— Mattie Miller Dixon.

"When I think back to Miss Brown as a teacher, the words that describe her



West Texas Tribune Publisher Floyd Miller poses for a picture with his former teacher Miss Jo Zelma Brown. Floyd says he has shown this picture to many of his friends and they all think his teacher, who turned 86 on Jan. 31, looks younger than he does. They aren't sure how she could have been his teacher.

as a teacher are passionate, committed, caring, student-focused, meticulous, and a role model without knowing she was. She set high expectations for students. She taught with excellence. We can all say she was a great educator and well respected."

— Rose Burns

"Miss Jo Zelma Brown was my teacher for 9th grade physical science and biology and chemistry in the 10th and 11th grade. She was a good instructor, with high expectations from her students, and not tolerating

any form of nonsense from students. She obtained a great amount of respect from both the staff and students at Stevens-Mayo High School and was an outstanding teacher. I personally learned a lot from my classes with her, and consider her one of my favorite teachers."

— Marcia Curry

"Ms. Brown was willing to help all of her students. My brother had a disability, and Ms. Brown was patient in working with him. My brother became an honorary son to Ms. Brown. They

stayed in contact after we moved to San Antonio. My brother called Ms. Brown every Sunday morning to check on her and to see how her week went. This was his routine until he passed away in 2022 at the age of 73.

"Ms. Brown, thank you for not only teaching but having a rapport with your students adding confidence, values, and appreciation to one's self esteem. In essence, you did not give us a fish but taught us how to fish, which was a lesson that lasted for a lifetime.

"Because of your efforts, my brother Charles had a wonderful career, and so did I."

— Freddie Miller

"Ms. Brown was my favorite teacher. I remember when she and Ms. Sparks came to Hallettsville. They use to come to our house and visit with my sister Shirley. She made me study. I remember one day she whipped me with a strap for misbehaving. I laughed when she finished. She looked at me and said, 'Dave this is serious. It hurts me more than it hurts you.' She taught me to be a better person. She went to Port Lavaca and picked up shirts for me a few days ago. I am selling them as a fundraiser for her church. I just got off the phone with her before you called. I didn't follow all of her advice, but she is still my favorite teacher."

— Dave "Party Party" Washington

"Ms. Brown lived next door to us, and she and my mother were good friends. After I graduated high school, I started calling her Aunt Jo as a token of endearment. I always refer to her as my favorite teacher."

— Marian Hogan

"My senior year at Hallettsville High School was the first year of full desegregation of the school system. It was people like Jo Zelma Brown, along with our new classmates, that made that transition nearly seamless. Ms. Brown was bright, kind and a true lady. Living in Hallettsville for many years after graduation, I've gotten to appreciate everything she does for the entire community, not just what she did for her students and our school."

— John Stuart Fryer

I will conclude by saying Miss Brown was a wonderful teacher and is a wonderful person. She came to Hallettsville and built upon the foundation that others laid, but she also blazed her own path. Thank you for your encouragement.

I want to do a roll call of all those individuals who influenced the lives of many at Stevens-Mayo during the time I was a student:

Principals: Mr. Lonnie D. Cunningham, Mr. A. E. Evans, Mr. Floyd Taylor

First Grade: Mrs. Ruth S. Issac

Second Grade: Mrs.

Nellie B. Kelly

Third Grade: Mrs. Pinky Newton

Fourth Grade: Mrs. Eloise Mitchell

Fifth Grade: Mrs. Marguerite Washington

Sixth Grade: Mrs. Porter Lee Dean Lemons

Seventh Grade: Mr. W.A. Gobert, Music; Mrs. Dicy Mae Adams, Home Economics; Miss Jo Zelma Brown, Chemistry; Mr. Toby Price, Math; Mr. T.S. "Tuff Stuff" Johnson, Math and Coach; Mr. Benjamin Lindsay II, Coach and Drivers Education; Mr. J.B. Polk, Vocational Agriculture; Ms. Julia Bunton, Elementary Teacher; Ms. Betty King, Elementary Teacher; Ms. Opal Jean Sparks, Teacher; Mr. Hart, Band Teacher; Mrs. Floyd Taylor, Music; Mrs. A.E. Evans, Teacher; Ms. Earlene Baines Williams, Librarian; Mrs. Julie Heliton, Teacher; Mr. J.J. Adams, County Agent 4-H Club; Professor J.E. Mayo and his wife, Mrs. Pearl Mayo, long time educators the school was named after.

Bus Drivers: Cousin Saint Pettit, Cousin Frazier Fisher, Mr. Moreland Bacon and Mr. Seabron Tyler

Cafeteria Worker: Mrs. Mildred Sanders Tyler

Janitor: Mr. Nathaniel McAfee.

If you would like to send Miss Jo Zelma Brown a note or birthday card you may send it to: Miss Jo Zelma Brown P.O. Box 181 Hallettsville, Texas 77964