

First James Weldon Johnson class to fully integrate in York County reflects on 50 years

By **Marie Albiges**

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Gayle Lawson Wright remembers dancing on the auditorium stage with her classmates on her last day at the James Weldon Johnson School.

She was a junior, along with 67 of her York County classmates who would be in a new – to them, anyway – school the following year.

It was the middle of the school day, and the otherwise well-behaved, all-black class of 1968 was celebrating, but they wouldn't be for long.

The assistant principal came and broke up the dance party, sending them back to their classrooms, Wright recalls with a laugh.

It was 1967, and one summer separated a transition that Wright and a few of her classmates described as “smooth” and “easy:” the integration of York County schools.

The group would graduate from York High School with their white peers the following year for the first time.

Fifty years later, Wright, her twin sister Olivia “Livvy” Lawson Epps, and classmates Sherman Hill, Barbara Nettles Harris and Sylvia Jefferson Carr will gather again to celebrate their graduation together as the last class that attended the James Weldon Johnson School before desegregation in York County.”

“We were a family, and we still are,” said Harris, sitting between Epps and White, now her sisters by marriage.

Hill, the organizer of the class of 1968 reunion being held on Aug. 17, is also in charge of rounding up former Johnson students for a biannual reunion that will take place on Aug. 18 at the Kiln Creek Golf Club and Resort.

A linebacker on the football team and a runner on the track team, Hill and his black football teammates were accepted at York High School their senior year.

“They welcomed us with open arms,” he said.

Now retired and living in Kiln Creek, Hill runs the Yorktown African-American Cultural Society and is a member of the York County Historical Committee.

Armed with yellow and green paraphernalia emblazoned with the school name, black-and-white photos of favorite teachers and yearbooks dating back to 1959, Hill and his friends dined at the Kiln Creek Golf Club and

Resort a few weeks before their class reunion.

They wondered which of their classmates would attend the Aug. 17 reunion and reminisced about being back in the halls of the Johnson school, now called Yorktown Middle School.

Before the school name changed and before integration, there were choir performances and football practice and drill team tryouts. There were spitballs to send to the ceiling in French class and cheers to learn for the pep rally.

“It was good living back then,” said Epps. She remembers the home-cooked meals served in the cafeteria, the smell of cookies wafting from the home economics classroom and the P.E. uniforms – green, snap-button, one-piece rompers.

Before it was Yorktown Middle School, Yorktown Intermediate School or the James Weldon Johnson School, it was the Training School, a six-room building that opened in 1921 on Goosley Road near Route 17. The building burned in 1953, and in 1954, the James Weldon Johnson School opened, named after the African-American author and poet.

A few years after integration, ninth-graders were moved to Yorktown High School. In 1992, the school name changed from Yorktown Intermediate school to Yorktown Middle School, and sixth grade was added.

The class of 1968 started first grade together at the James Weldon Johnson School, and to them, there was more pride in being from the school where they spent 11 years than the school they graduated from in 1968.

The shift to York High School was relatively easily, the classmates said. York County was small at the time, and its large military population was reflected in the schools, where students were well traveled and open minded.

“The only reason I was disappointed was because I had gone to this school for 11 years and I didn’t understand why our class was the one this would happen to,” Carr said.

Many Johnson teachers followed the class of 1968 to York High School, making the transition easier.

“We didn’t experience prejudices as they do today,” Harris said. “Where we grew up, everybody knew one another.”

On Aug. 19, former Johnson students in town for the reunion will congregate at what is now Yorktown Middle School for church services.

Hill said he was proud to be the last class to attend the James Weldon Johnson School, and proud to be the one to bring his former classmates together.

“With this class, it’s effortless,” he said.

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