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Thursday, May 7, 2015
at The City National Grove of Anaheim

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Once the voice of rage, local hero speaks so O.C. can eat

BY JOHN FABRIS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Looking back, Gloria Banks can see that she might have been smart to just shut up.

Little black girls in 1950s McGehee, Arkansas, weren't supposed to look white people in the eye, she says – much less tell them off.

But if Gloria Banks had learned that lesson, she wouldn't be the pride of Orange County's Friendship Baptist Church, the dedicated volunteer they call Miss Gloria. She wouldn't be one of 11 local heroes being honored by OC Human Relations on May 7.

You see, Miss Gloria has always been her daddy's daughter. As she tells the story, daddy James Miller wasn't one to keep quiet when something needed saying. James was a farmer who never got past fourth grade. But he was a Pentecostal minister with a cause: Empowering his black neighbors by teaching them to read and write.

James would gather families deep in the woods for lessons by bonfire light. Gloria -- the 11th of 13 brothers and sisters -- taught writing and served as lookout. James feared there'd be hell to pay if McGehee's white city fathers found out what his family was up to. He was right.

"I was like my dad. I liked to mouth off," Banks said. "When I think back on it, it's hard to believe I'm still alive."

But she couldn't stop herself. "I watched what my dad and mom went through. It just set off a rage in me."

Banks says she can see and smell the childhood memories:

She was 7, wearing new penny loafers with steel pennies. Her pigtailed were so long she had to push them aside when she and her sister Cloteel sat down on a bench in town. When a bulbous-nosed drunk staggered out of a saloon, Gloria turned and watched.

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“What are you looking at, ya little black girl?” the drunk slurred. He spat on Gloria’s foot.

“I was disgusted,” Banks recalled. “I picked up a popsicle stick and scraped the mucus off my shoe. I was just about to sling it back at the man when Cloteel grabbed my pigtail and yanked me away.”

LONGING FOR FAIRNESS

The Miller family worked hard. James raised fruit, vegetables, meat and cotton. Gloria’s mother, Mary, churned butter. James sold all of that to white people in town from his horse-drawn wagon.

But when black families went shopping, Banks said, they didn’t get a fair shake.

Banks said she would sneak out of school on shopping day and surprise her mom at the store – not wanting mild-mannered Mary to get bullied by the merchants.

“I saw in the paper that if you buy an icebox at McMahan’s you’d get a free turkey platter. Mom bought an icebox on layaway. I went with her around Thanksgiving time to make the final payment. The proprietor told my mom that James had better come pick up the icebox right away or he’d sell it to someone else.”

No way, Gloria thought. “I told the man, ‘We made all the payments. That icebox belongs to us. And by the way, where is our turkey platter?’ ”

ESCAPE FROM ARKANSAS

In 1954 – the year Gloria turned 12 – her father’s activism caught up with him. He was blacklisted by the townspeople, preventing him from selling in McGehee. “I remember white men coming around with whips and sticks, threatening my father,” Banks said. “Late one night, I heard him say if he didn’t leave, he’d be dead.”

Gloria’s dad and brother drove out of town under cover of darkness – vowing not to stop until they got to Texas. It would be two years before Gloria saw her daddy again, in 1956, when he was able to get the family train tickets to join him in California.

NEW STATE, NEW OUTLOOK

Resettled in Bakersfield, the family continued to work hard. But life got better. The brothers and sisters picked grapes and strawberries during school breaks. Gloria worked as a maid, graduated high school, attended community college, married, and had a daughter named Michelle.

After divorcing and moving to Placentia in 1979, Banks enrolled in Fullerton College and worked part-time there. Alarmed by the minority dropout rate, she became a founding member of the school’s Black Student Union. She helped found the Fullerton College food bank.

Banks’ big mouth had become her high calling. A friend helped her understand that. “He told me, ‘You have the ability to talk people into doing anything for you. You should use that talent.’ ”

She became a force for compassion and volunteerism. In their nomination letter for Banks’ OC Human Relations award, Rev. Dr. Linda Long and Anitra Dempsey of Friendship Baptist sum up the highlights: Banks has been a member of the Orange County NAACP since 1982, eight years as president. Today, at 72, she chairs the NAACP’s Education Committee to ensure students are academically and financially ready for college. With

the Santa Ana and Garden Grove Elks Lodges, Banks seeks Christmas toy donations for children. For 17 years she was active in the Tri-City Homeless Coalition.

“After what I’ve been through, what would I be if I didn’t have empathy for people?” Banks asked. She said she relates to immigrants trying to give their families a better life, and feels for the homeless.

“Back in Arkansas, you’d see hobos with knapsacks tied to poles like Huckleberry Finn. Mom would always have something for them.”

So Banks – who remains a Placentia resident -- has focused her persuasive powers on feeding Orange County. She is lead volunteer at the Friendship Foundation Food and Clothing Pantry at the church in Yorba Linda. High-energy and quick with a laugh, she works her magic on grocery stores, factories, warehouses -- anyone who might donate food.

It’s nearly a full-time job. Five days a week, Banks collects and sorts food. By 3 p.m. each Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday she’s at the trailer behind the church setting up. From 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. she hands out canned goods, produce and meat to all comers – homeless people, families, college kids. Then she packs up and does the books. Friday morning she’s back to deliver perishable leftovers to pregnant teens and recovering addicts at shelters and halfway houses.

On May 7, however, Banks plans to take at least part of an evening off. She says she’ll find a dress and show up at the City National Grove of Anaheim for the OC Human Relations awards ceremony celebrating justice, diversity and the human spirit.

She said she hasn’t had time to think about the award -- but was surprised to win.

“The Lord has given me the gift of gab to talk people into giving us food,” she said. “I’m just doing what comes naturally.”

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(BREAKOUT BOX) IF YOU GO

WHAT: OC Human Relations Awards 44, celebrating justice, diversity and the human spirit. OCHR will honor six diverse community leaders and three distinguished businesses from throughout Orange County. OCHR also will present a community policing award and a distinguished school award.

WHEN: 5:30-9:15 p.m., Thursday, May 7.

WHERE: The City National Grove of Anaheim, 2200 East Katella Avenue, Anaheim.

TICKETS & SPONSORSHIPS: Available online.

For tickets, biographies of the 11 honorees, and other details, see www.ochumanrelationsawards.org

Photos

- Available at www.ochumanrelationsawards.org/newsroom (via dropbox link). Captions are below.

Photo captions:

01_Banks_Smokehouse -- Young Gloria Miller sits in her father's smokehouse on the family farm in McGehee, Arkansas, circa 1950. With her are brother Ivory Miller and sister Charlene Miller. (Photo courtesy of Gloria Banks)

02_Banks_Friendship -- Gloria Banks smiles outside Friendship Baptist Church at 17145 Bastanchury Road in Yorba Linda. Banks is lead volunteer at the food pantry there. (Photo by Mindy Schauer)

03_Banks_Pantry -- Inside the trailer that houses the Friendship Foundation Food and Clothing Pantry, Gloria Banks shows off her wares. She says she is always eager for donations – particularly dried pinto beans, which are in high demand “because they stick to the ribs.” (Photo by Mindy Schauer)

04_Banks_Potatoes -- Gloria Banks hauls potatoes as she packs up the food pantry for the day. The pantry is open to anyone in need, 4-7 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. (Photo by Mindy Schauer)

About OC Human Relations

OC Human Relations is a local nonprofit with the mission to foster mutual understanding among residents and eliminate prejudice, intolerance and discrimination in order to make Orange County a better place for ALL people to live, work and do business. OC Human Relations operates with the belief that ALL people should live free of violence and discrimination. The organization brings people together to create safe and inclusive schools and communities, develop diverse leaders and mediate conflict. For 44 years, OC Human Relations has been honoring individuals, law enforcement, schools and community organizations for their contributions to human relations.

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