

A Tribute to

BLACK HISTORY

Special Edition
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2026



CELEBRATING ACHIEVEMENTS THROUGH STORYTELLING

For the past several years during February, The McKenzie Banner has produced a special edition featuring local Black residents and their stories.

We do this not because other stories are less important, but because many of these stories have remained untold. To be true stewards of history, we need not shy away or cherry pick the narrative, but welcome all voices to be part of the collective history. Only by doing this will we achieve harmony.

The Banner is thankful for each person who took the time to meet with us and share his or her stories. Thank

you for the dedication and sacrifices you've made in your respective career fields and in service to our country. Your impact on the world is greater than you realize. Thank you for entrusting us to tell your stories.

Additionally, we are grateful to each sponsor of this edition. Your support makes local journalism possible. Reader, please remember to shop local first. Small businesses are the backbone of America, and your support makes the difference.

It is our great honor to bring you this tribute to Black history.



Left, Hannah Bilger (center) is pictured with McKenzie High School Minority Council leaders, Principal Kelly Spivey and members of the University of Tennessee at Martin's Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. Above, Hannah Bilger speaks to McKenzie High School students. Photos by Lyndsey Summers/The Banner

Hannah Bilger Delivers Black History Month Address On Accountability, Personal Growth

BY LYNDSEY SUMMERS
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MCKENZIE (February 18) — Hannah Bilger was the guest speaker at McKenzie High School's Black History Month program, and she used her time at the podium to remind students of their potential — and the power they hold to shape their own futures.

Returning to the halls she once walked as a student, Bilger opened her address with gratitude and reflection.

"Thank you to McKenzie for allowing me to be here today," she said. "Being back here just reminds me that where you start is not your limit."

Bilger is a 2018 graduate of McKenzie High School. She has since obtained a bachelor's degree in communications and a mas-

ter's degree in higher education leadership from the University of Tennessee at Martin. Bilger currently serves as the community engagement coordinator for the Weakley County Prevention Coalition, where she focuses on prevention, education, outreach and building strong community partnerships.

Speaking to a packed room of students and faculty, Bilger centered her message on one repeated phrase: "You are built for this moment."

She encouraged students to understand that life's challenges are not setbacks, but preparation.

"Being built doesn't mean being perfect," Bilger said. "It means being tested. It means being stretched. It means surviving things you thought would stop you."

Throughout her speech, Bilger emphasized personal

responsibility and ownership. While acknowledging that students cannot control everything that happens to them, she stressed that they can control how they respond.

"You control the effort you give," she said. "You control your next choice."

She illustrated how small decisions accumulate over time.

"Choices stack," Bilger said, raising her arm. "Small choices become habits. Habits become your destination. Your destination becomes your future."

Bilger also addressed the labels and doubts young people sometimes face, urging students not to internalize negative narratives.

"Other people may try to put labels on you, saying that you're not smart enough, you're not enough, you're not going to make it," she said. "But those words

QUOTE

"Every generation has a moment where they decide, 'Am I going to repeat the past, or am I going to build something greater and better?' This is your moment."

— Hannah Bilger

are not the final draft."

Instead of seeking validation through attention or popularity, she encouraged discipline and direction.

"Ownership isn't always flashy," Bilger said. "Sometimes it looks like showing up when it's hard. Asking for help. Doing the right thing when no one is watching. Choosing growth over comfort."

She reminded students that change is possible — academically, personally and spiritually — but only if they decide to act.

mation: "I am built for this moment."

In a program designed to celebrate history and progress, Bilger's message focused squarely on the present — urging students to take ownership of their present circumstances.

"Every generation," she said, "has a moment where they decide, 'Am I going to repeat the past, or am I going to build something greater and better?' This is your moment."

Bilger received a standing ovation at the conclusion of her speech — but she wasn't done yet. Bilger, a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., later joined members of the University of Tennessee at Martin's Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. for a strolling performance that closed out the ceremony.

Linda Robinson Hicks 1966 Webb Graduate

BY BRAD SAM
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Linda Robinson Hicks was born in McMoresville to Andrew Luter, a farmer, and Onnie Luter, a homemaker, the fourth of eight siblings.

She attended Dunbar School in McMoresville and MTA in Atwood before attending Webb High School in McKenzie for her final three years.

Linda graduated in 1966 with the final class to graduate from Webb.

While at Webb, she played basketball under Coach James Greer, her cousin.

She told The Banner, "I had the best education I could have received," something she learned quickly after graduation when she moved to Chicago and joined the workforce. "I found out that I knew a lot more than most of the people I worked with, so I'll always be thankful for that education."

Her first job was as a secretary for Allied Radio, which closed. She then worked at a bank before she was hired by the University of Chicago in 1972.



Left, Thomas and Linda Hicks. Right, Linda Hicks with her two sons and four grandchildren. Submitted photos

She was hired as a medical biller, but was promoted to supervisor, manager and, eventually, director in the finance department.

Linda worked for the university for over 40 years until her retirement 12 years ago. She said, "Life was good

to me, and I think it's because of the way I was raised and the education I received."

Linda is married to Thomas Hicks and has two sons and four grandchildren.

She is an active member of the Webb Alumni Associ-

ation, serving as co-chairperson over scholarship funds. She's also the vice president and treasurer of the organization's Chicago chapter.

She said, "Webb was really significant because of who I became and how I was able to succeed, sup-

port my family and educate my children. I learned so much. I didn't realize how much until I got out into the real world. It shaped my whole life, really made me who I am. Being brought up in church and school, that combination and the fam-

ily atmosphere, it was just great. I wish that my kids could have experienced what I did."

She noted that her grandchildren love to visit Webb, and the three oldest are Webb scholarship recipients.



Michael Tate

A Lifetime of Service to Community and Country

BY LYNDSY SUMMERS
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Michael Tate has dedicated much of his life to service — service to his country, to his workplace and to his community. Asked how he hopes to be remembered, his answer is simple: for his fairness.

That principle has followed Tate from his early adult years into retirement, influencing the way he works, leads and serves.

After graduating from an integrated Trezevant High School in 1969, Tate attended vocational school and worked briefly before being drafted into the U.S. Army during the Vietnam era. He served two years in communications, supporting troops overseas while stationed in the United States.

His assignments included White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, Fort Campbell in Kentucky and West Point in New York, where he helped train cadets in field communications.

Within three weeks of leaving the Army, he was hired for a job with DuPont, where his father worked. That opportunity turned into a 42-year career.

At DuPont, Tate started in production and steadily moved up to supervisor and, later, area manager. He ran a \$4 million experimental pilot plant and helped develop products containing titanium dioxide — a white pigment used in paint, cosmetics and building materials found in everyday life.

"I did good service for the company," he said.

His leadership style centered on recognizing people as individuals.



Left, Michael Tate is pictured with his wife, Monica Adams Tate. Right, Michael Tate's children — Terence, Erica and Treven Markee — are photographed together. Submitted photos

"I'm not a believer of treating everybody the same," Tate said. "Everybody's different. You have to learn whoever you deal with and treat them accordingly ... and try to treat them like you would be treated."

While he built a long and stable career, Tate also witnessed moments that revealed lingering racial tensions. He recalls an incident early on when someone kicked him in what was described as a prank. The individual later apologized. He also remembers nooses appearing in certain areas of the plant, though no one ever claimed responsibility.

"Discrimination is so ... disguised now," he said. "But it's there."

Rather than withdraw, Tate leaned further into service.

After retiring in 2014, he became increasingly active in civic life. He serves on the Carroll County Election Commission, helping monitor and administer elections.

The role involves reviewing voter registration information, ensuring procedures are followed correctly and preparing for busy election cycles.

He also serves as a board member for West Tennessee Legal Services and is an active member of the NAACP. His appointment to West Tennessee Legal Services came after the passing of an NAACP representative from Carroll County. Tate believes his corporate experience and active involvement in the NAACP played a role in his selection.

With the NAACP, he works on issues that arise locally — cases involving discrimination, housing concerns or situations where individuals believe they have been treated unfairly.

"We mainly work on problems when they arise," he said. "When we think somebody has been wronged ... we try to represent them, look out for their best interest."



Tate said he grew up around the NAACP. Family members and acquaintances were involved, and he understood what the organization stood for. Joining after retirement felt like a natural extension of values he had long carried.

"That's the whole purpose of a quality life," he said. "Serving your fellow man."

His commitment to service has also included time on the Huntingdon Planning Commission, where he participated in discussions about the city's future growth and development. He twice ran for county commissioner, saying he believed he could help the county. Though he was not elected, he remains engaged in local issues.

Tate also plays a key role in preserving Black history in Carroll County through his work with the Webb School Alumni Association,

where he serves as first vice president. Though he did not attend Webb himself, his siblings did. In his role, he manages bylaws and policies and works to ensure the organization stays on course.

"Some organizations, if they deviate from their bylaws and policies, they can become nonexistent," he said.

For Tate, preserving history is tied to protecting community identity. Many former Black school buildings in the county — including the McLemoresville, Trezevant and Atwood (MTA) School he attended for several years — have been destroyed or repurposed, and records have been lost.

"Preserving Black history, especially now, is more important than it ever was," he said.

Throughout his life, Tate has seen change. He attended segregated schools before graduating from an integrated high school.

He served in the military during a turbulent period in American history. He built a decades-long career in industry and later stepped into public service roles.

He acknowledges progress over the past 50 years but also sees continuing inequities in employment opportunities and representation.

"It's gotten better," he said. "But it's still a lot of things that ... it's a lot of glass ceilings."

Tate and his wife, Monica Adams Tate, have lived in Huntingdon for decades. Tate has three children: Treven Markee Tate and the late Erica Tate Harris and Terence Tate. He is the grandfather of six and great-grandfather of three.

When reflecting on his life, Tate does not point first to military assignments, management titles or board memberships. He returns to character, to fairness and to service.



Ruby Bridges is escorted to class by the U.S. Marshal Service. Photo Courtesy Associated Press

Did You Know?

The history of African Americans has been shaped by many influential figures, including various civil rights activists. Ruby Bridges may be one of the youngest. At age six, Ruby Bridges became the first African American student to integrate the formerly all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans.

Although Bridges lived five blocks away from William Frantz Elementary School, she had to attend kindergarten several miles away at an all-black segregated school. Bridges volunteered to take an entrance test to be able to attend the all-white school. The test was purportedly designed to be extremely difficult so that

students would have a hard time passing it, and thusly New Orleans could avoid de-segregation if all the African American children failed the test.

Individuals from the NAACP informed Bridges' parents that their daughter was one of only six African American students to pass the test. On November 14, 1960, she was escorted to class by her mother and the United States Marshals Service due to the presence of angry mobs outside the school. Bridges was the first African American student to attend the school and the first black child to attend an all-white elementary school in the south.

The first day of school

proved poor as nearly all of the white parents at the school had kept their children home and Bridges spent the day with the principal. The ensuing days weren't much better. Eventually, only one teacher in the school, Barbara Henry, formerly of Boston, agreed to teach Bridges. Bridges never missed a day of school that year, even though she ate lunch alone each day and no one played with her at recess.

Her early foray into civil rights prompted Bridges to establish The Ruby Bridges Foundation to promote tolerance and change through education.



Classmates from the Webb Class of 1966 (L to R): Neal Williamson, Peggy Hillsman, Dr. Joe Bryant, Priscilla Staten Smith and Ike Gilbert. Submitted photo

Priscilla Staten Smith

1966 Webb High School Graduate

BY BRAD SAM
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Priscilla Staten Smith was born in Milan and raised in Huntingdon.

She's the daughter of Jim Staten, a construction worker who worked across the country on U.S. highways, and Susie Staten Marshal, who sold insurance and also worked at the office of Dr. Gideon in Huntingdon.

Priscilla attended school in Clarksburg and then at Hale Junior High in Huntingdon. She spent her final three years at Webb High School, where she graduated in 1966 at age 16 as part of the final graduating class.

While at Webb, she played basketball and was a temporary hall monitor. Her teachers were Robert Simmons and Doris Woodard. Priscilla was part of Woodard's business department.

Priscilla attended Tennessee State University and graduated with an associate's degree in Business Education.

She worked for the State of Tennessee for 20 years before moving to St. Louis, where she worked at the Missouri Botanical Garden for 14 years until her retirement six years ago.



Priscilla's Webb High School graduation photo. Submitted photo

At the garden, she was an interpreter in the historic home of founder Henry Shaw and managed the volunteer tour guides.

She's an active member of New Sunny Mount Baptist Church, serving as secretary, Sunday school superintendent and a member of the choir.

Priscilla is also a member of the Webb Alumni Association. Since last year, she has served as the national secretary for the organization and is a past parliamentarian.

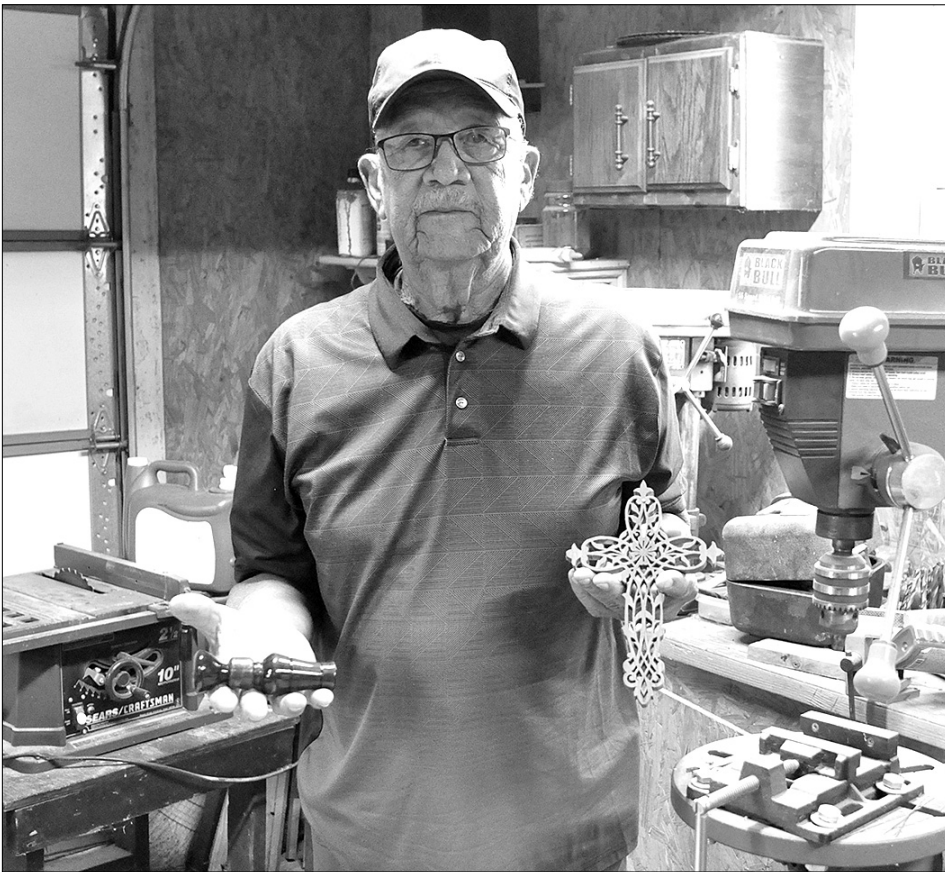
She told The Banner, "Being a part of the last class, to see that as a people we have

come together, and we are not going to let the history of Webb High School go away. It was an important part of the community for many years. After integration, we were scattered, but a few people came together to protect the legacy. The intent now is to keep bringing in our children and grandchildren to continue the legacy, or it could all be lost. It's a legacy that has to continue, and, with the people we have in positions now, I'm excited to see how it's going to continue."

Priscilla has one son and three granddaughters who reside in Nashville.

"If you really think about it, if we begin to teach history exactly the way that it happened - good, bad, ugly, no matter what - I believe that we're going to find that we are closer, more connected than we are apart. "

— Ruby Bridges



H.B. Adkisson does decorative woodworking in his home shop, including duck calls and decorative crosses. Photo by Brad Sam/The Banner

H.B. Adkisson

BY BRAD SAM
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H.B. Adkisson of McKenzie was born in Trezevant in 1939 to Dink and Essie B. (Hampton) Adkisson.

He was the youngest of ten children, and his mother died when he was very young. He was raised by his father and sisters.

The family were sharecroppers, raising cotton, corn and hogs.

H.B. describes his father as “kind of a cultured guy,” and told The Banner about his “ginseng hunting” for extra money. “When I was a child, this would be in August, he would come home and he’d have these roots. We had an old pump, and I had to pump that old pump and wash those roots. He’d lay them on top of the house to dry, and he’d ship them. That was one of the ways he made money.”

H.B. first went to Clay School, a two-room school in Trezevant, about a mile and a half from his house on Highway 79.

He attended Webb School in McKenzie from ninth grade until his graduation in 1959. He spent two years on the old Webb campus, with multiple buildings for things like the dormitories, cafeteria and gymnasium. Then, the new building was constructed with everything under one roof.

While at Webb, H.B. played basketball and participated in agriculture activities such as livestock judging, in which he competed at the state level one year.

He also did some woodworking, which led him to devote some of his time in retirement to decorative woodworking.

After high school, H.B. did farm labor and worked at a service station until he joined the military.

He attended basic training at Ft. Smith in Arkansas and advanced training at Ft. Bliss in El Paso. He then went to Ft. Sill in Oklahoma for ballistic missile training.

H.B. said, “I only saw a live missile one time, but it wasn’t a live warhead. We went to White Sands, New Mexico, and fired it. We only did that one time. We left Ft. Sill in a convoy. We fired at a target 114 miles away and hit 14 feet from center of target. We were right there, in a bunker, no more than 140 yards from it, and you’re looking at it going up. A missile going up doesn’t look like what you see on television, it kind of lags, then goes up.”

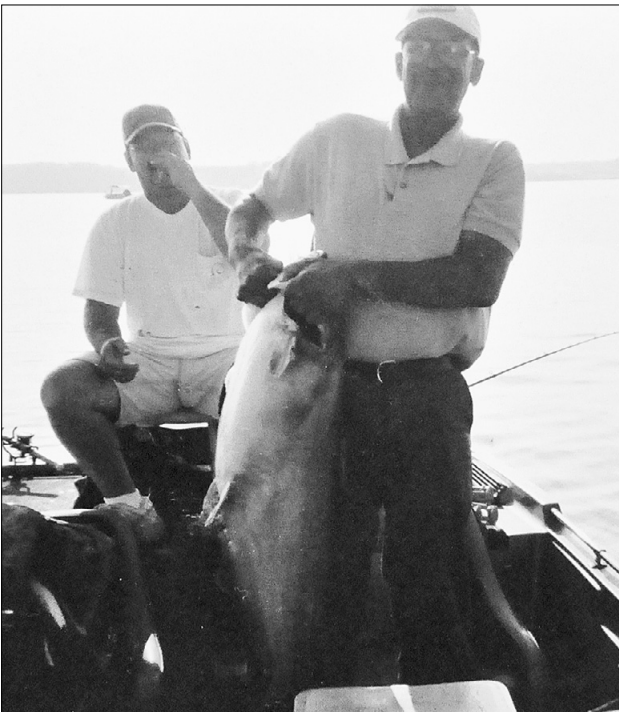
He was deployed to Korea for 14 months with the 3rd Missile Battalion, 81st Artillery Regiment.

At the time, units were just beginning to integrate. His unit had about 350 men, and only seven were black.

H.B. described the experience, “You wind up on duty more than most people. And that’s just a fact. And your promotions aren’t going to come on like other



Above, H.B. Adkisson won the company golf tournament during his tenure at the Milan Arsenal. Below, H.B. Adkisson caught a 50-plus pound catfish while fishing in Camden. Submitted photos



people.”

He appreciated the chance to travel. On the journey across the Pacific Ocean, his ship made stops in Hawaii and Japan.

At the end of his deployment, H.B. returned to Ft. Sill and retired from military service.

He worked at Brown Shoe Company for less than a year before he was hired at the Milan arsenal, where he worked until his retirement in 1999.

He hired in on production for about ten months, then transferred to security, where his military specialization in safeguarding classified materials was a valuable asset.

When Vietnam ended, his unique skill set allowed him to stay on when the arsenal decreased its ranks from a wartime high of about 7,000 people down to about 2,000.

It was also during his time at the arsenal when H.B. picked up golf. Some coworkers challenged him to try it, and he practiced hard.

When he first played in the arsenal’s golf tournament, he finished in last place. Five years later, he won it.

Golf would become a big part of his life as he would travel to places like Memphis, Nashville and Little Rock to compete.

H.B. also became a member of the Carroll Lake Golf Club, possibly the first black

member.

He won back-to-back senior club championships in 2003-4.

In addition to golfing, H.B. took up fishing, which he continued until around 2020. The highlight of his time on the water was catching a 50-plus pound catfish in Camden.

One hobby he has continued is woodworking. He has a small shop beside his home where he crafts duck calls, decorative crosses and clock bodies.

He enjoys attending Nights on Broadway and going to the movies.

H.B. said, “You know, I’m a different kind of person. I enjoy people, but I enjoy peace more than anything. I just like to be at peace with everybody. I don’t like confusion. I like to be successful with anything I do, but I still love to be at peace. And I like to treat everybody fairly. I don’t look at you as a white man. I look at you as a human being. And I guess that’s one of the reasons I got along so well at the arsenal, because I treated everybody with the same respect. I didn’t have any favorites, and I don’t think of myself as better than anybody. You know, I just do the best I can. That’s it.”

H.B. has one daughter, Kimberly Bell Webb, two sons, Rodney and Randall and four grandchildren.

He attends Mount Ararat Baptist Church in Trezevant.

John D. Williams

A Testament to Webb School’s Resilience

John D. Williams was one of the last students to graduate from Webb School, receiving his diploma just one year before desegregation. Looking back, Williams credits many of his life’s successes to the lessons instilled by his Webb School instructors.

Between 1958 and 1966, Webb School served as the sole educational facility for Black students in grades one through twelve in Carroll County.

Williams graduated as part of a 52-member class. At the time, opportunities for Black students were often limited by segregation and economic barriers. Some of his classmates went on to college; Williams did not.



“Many of us did not have that opportunity, but we were given enough education from the staff here at Webb High School,” said Williams. “We were prepared to deal with life as it was presented to us in the world.”

Williams said his instructors taught him and his classmates more than academics. They taught them how to communicate with others, how to carry themselves with dignity and how to treat people with respect. He said the school presented him with opportunities that, otherwise, he might not have had.

After high school, Williams took a job with a local construction company. Though grateful for the opportunity, he soon realized construction was not the path he wanted to pursue long-term. After working two or three other jobs, he made a decision that would reshape

his future: he enlisted in the United States Air Force.

Williams served his country for four years before returning to Carroll County, where he settled in Huntingdon.

He began working for RJR Archer — now Gränges — an aluminum manufacturing company, starting as a packer. Through the years, he climbed the ranks — machine operator, lab technician, final inspector, supervisor — eventually becoming manager and superintendent of the finishing department. Williams served as superintendent for 33 years before retiring in 2002 as the startup coordinator for the company’s new plant.

Since retiring, Williams has dedicated his life to ministry, serving as pastor of Timberlake Grove Baptist Church in Wildersville.

“Webb prepared me to do all of these things,”

said Williams. “I feel like my entire life was affected by the education I got at Webb High School.... It is actually a thrill for me to be able to say, ‘Thank you, Webb High School.’”

Williams has served as the second vice president of the Webb School Alumni Association. The alumni group operates nationwide, connecting a community of classmates who, together, work to preserve the legacy of their alma mater.

The present-day Webb School building houses an on-site museum dedicated to preserving the history of the school and its students. The museum is open to the public on Tuesdays and is available for tours any day of the week upon appointment.

Now recognized on the National Register of Historic Places, Webb School stands as a symbol of resilience — and Williams remains one of its living legacies.

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“My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”

— Desmond Tutu

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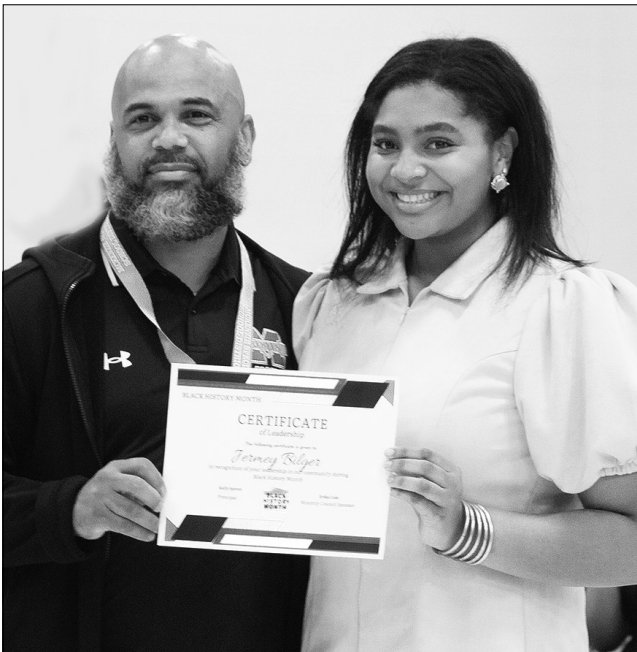
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Left, Minority Council President Carlton Townes presents a certificate to Dr. Karlene Ellis (left). Right, Minority Council Vice President Aleecia Williams presents a certificate to Jeremy Bilger (left). Photos by Lyndsey Summers/The Banner



McKenzie Minority Council Lauds Bilger, Ellis for Service

BY LYNDSY SUMMERS
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During Wednesday's Black History Month program, the McKenzie High School Minority Council honored Jeremy Bilger and Dr. Karlene Ellis for their years of service and impact on students.

Minority Council Vice President Aleecia Williams presented a certificate to Bilger, recognizing his faithful leadership and commitment to uplifting others.

Bilger moved to McKenzie in 2007 with his wife, Aimee, and two children, Hannah and Joe'L. He served six years

as a youth pastor at Brooks Chapel in South Fulton and now serves as assistant pastor, continuing his dedication to ministry and service.

Bilger holds a bachelor's degree in health science with a minor in coaching and serves as the assistant soccer coach at McKenzie High School. He is also the founder of UP Outreach, an organization supporting senior citizens and promoting dignity and purpose at every stage of life. Williams noted that his impact reaches far beyond the church and into the everyday lives of those he serves.

Minority Council Presi-

dent Carlton Townes then honored Dr. Karlene Ellis for her inspiring journey and commitment to education and leadership.

Ellis grew up in Jamaica and became a first-generation college student before earning her doctoral degree. She attended Bethel University, where she excelled academically and athletically, helping lead her soccer team to three national tournament appearances. Her team was later inducted into the Bethel University Hall of Fame.

Today, Ellis serves as a special education teacher and as McKenzie High

School's head soccer coach, where she mentors student-athletes and has led the program to record-setting success. She also founded the Carroll County Special Athletic Games to promote inclusion and remains active in mentoring and community service.

Townes praised Ellis for her strength, dedication and unwavering belief in students' potential.

The recognition of Bilger and Ellis served as a reminder that Black History Month is not only about honoring the past, but celebrating the leaders making an impact today.

The History And Impact Of the Divine Nine

Black History Month often highlights the lasting influence of historically Black fraternities and sororities, commonly known as the "Divine Nine."

The Divine Nine refers to the nine historically Black Greek-letter organizations that make up the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), founded in 1930 at Howard University. The organizations were established between 1906 and 1963 during a time when Black students were largely excluded from campus life and leadership opportunities.

The nine organizations are Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (1906), Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. (1908), Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (1911), Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. (1911), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (1913), Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. (1914), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. (1920), Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. (1922) and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. (1963).

Beyond social fellowship, these organizations were founded on principles of scholarship, service, leadership and advocacy. Members have historically played key

roles in civil rights efforts, education initiatives and community development across the nation.

One of the most recognizable traditions of Divine Nine culture is the step show. Stepping is a rhythmic, synchronized performance art that uses clapping, stomping, chanting and coordinated movement to tell stories, express pride and represent organizational unity. The tradition draws influence from African dance, military drills and Black collegiate culture.

Closely related is strolling, a coordinated line dance performed by fraternity and sorority members at events and celebrations. Unlike stepping, strolling is typically done in a line formation to music, emphasizing unity and brotherhood or sisterhood.

Today, Divine Nine organizations continue to serve communities through mentorship programs, scholarships, voter registration efforts and service projects, maintaining a legacy that spans more than a century. Their traditions — from scholarship to stepping — remain a vibrant part of Black cultural and collegiate life.

Things You Probably Didn't Know Were Created By Black Inventors

Blood Bank

Charles Richard Drew became interested in researching the preservation of blood when he was studying at Columbia University. Drew discovered a method of separating red blood cells from plasma and then storing the two components separately. This new process allowed blood to be stored for more than a week, which was the maximum at that time. Drew documented these findings in a paper that led to the first blood bank.

Potato Chips

George Crum was working as a chef at a resort in New York. A customer sent his dish of french fries back to the kitchen, claiming that they weren't good. In an irritated fit, Crum cut the potatoes as thinly as possible, fried them until they were burnt crisps, and threw a generous handful of salt on top. Thus, the chip was born.

Gas Mask

Garrett Morgan developed what he called the safety hood after noticing how many firefighters were killed by smoke on the job. The hood, which went over the head, featured tubes connected to wet sponges that filtered out smoke and provided fresh oxygen.

Protective Mailbox

Philip B. Downing created a mailbox design that featured an outer door and an inner safety door to avoid parcels being stolen. This safety device allowed mailboxes to be set up everywhere.

Home Security System

African American nurse Mary Van Brittan Brown, devised an early security unit for her own home. She and her husband took out a patent for the system in the same year, and they were awarded the patent three years later, in 1969. Home security systems commonly used today took various elements from her design.

Three-Light Traffic Light

Garrett Morgan was the first Black person in Cleveland, Ohio, to own a car. After he witnessed a severe car accident at an intersection in the city, he expanded on the current traffic light by adding a "yield" component, warning oncoming drivers of an impending stop.

Refrigerated Trucks

Frederick McKinley Jones created a roof-mounted cooling system that was used to refrigerate goods on trucks during extended transportation in the mid-

1930s. He received a patent for his invention in 1940 and co-founded the US Thermo Control Company, later known as Thermo King.

Automatic Elevator Doors

Alexander Miles took out a patent in 1887 for a mechanism that automatically opens and closes elevator shaft doors. His designs are largely reflected in elevators used today.

Folding Cabinet Bed

In 1885, Sarah Goode became the first Black woman to receive a US patent. She moved to Chicago and opened a furniture store. It was there she came up with an industry changing idea that brought more urban residents with limited space into her store.

Improved Ironing Board

In the late 19th century, the ironing board was improved by Sarah Boone. One of the first Black women in U.S. history to receive a patent, she created a narrower and curved design, making it easier to iron garments. Boone's design morphed into the modern board that we use today.

Electret Microphone

Dr. James E. West co-invented a foil electret microphone, which was less

expensive to produce than the typically used condenser microphones.

Color IBM PC Monitor, Gigahertz Chip

You can thank Mark Dean for co-inventing the color monitor. Without his invention, we'd still be typing in a colorless interweb.

Super Soaker

Summer just wouldn't be the same without Lonnie Johnson's invention. Johnson was an Aerospace Engineer for NASA who happened to invent the popular children's toy.

Lawn Sprinkler

This invention by Joseph A. Smith helped dads everywhere keep their grass green while allowing kids a fun toy to jump around in.

Peanut Butter

Everyone and their dog can thank George Washington Carver for the invention of peanut butter.

Clothes Dryer

George T. Sampson created the clothes dryer in 1892.

Laserphaco

Patricia Bath, an ophthalmologist and laser scientist, invented a device and technique used to remove cataracts and revive patients' eyesight.

Automatic Gear Shift

Richard Spikes created the automatic gear shift, helping people drive up hills everywhere.

Folding Chair

John Purdy created the folding chair, which is used in picnics and school graduations everywhere.

Golf Tees

Golf was a totally different sport before Dr. George Grant came along.

Ice Cream Scooper

Alfred L. Cralle invented the ice cream scooper, allowing kids to have larger scoops than spoonfuls.

Source: DailyHive.com



Madam C.J. Walker was the child of former slaves. She later became the first female African American millionaire. Photo Courtesy A'Lelia Bundles/Walker Family Collection

Did You Know?

Madam C.J. Walker invented a line of African American hair products after suffering from a scalp ailment that resulted in her own hair loss. She promoted her products by traveling around the country giving lecture-demonstrations and eventually established Madame C.J. Walker Laboratories to manufacture cosmetics and train sales beauticians.

Walker was born Sarah Breedlove on December 23, 1867, on a cotton plantation near Delta, Louisiana. Her parents, Owen and Minerva, were enslaved and recently freed, and Sarah, who was their fifth child, was the first in her family to be free-born.

At age 14, to escape both her oppressive working environment and the frequent mistreatment she endured at the hands of her brother-in-law, Sarah married a man named Moses McWilliams. On June 6, 1885, Sarah gave birth to a daughter, A'Lelia.

When Moses died two years later, Sarah and A'Lelia moved to St. Louis, where Sarah's brothers had established them-

selves as barbers. There, Sarah found work as a washerwoman, earning \$1.50 a day — enough to send her daughter to the city's public schools.

In 1907 Walker and her husband traveled around the South and Southeast promoting her products and giving lecture demonstrations of her "Walker Method" — involving her own formula for pomade, brushing and the use of heated combs.

As profits continued to grow, in 1908 Walker opened a factory and a beauty school in Pittsburgh, and by 1910, when Walker transferred her business operations to Indianapolis, the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company had become wildly successful, with profits that were the modern-day equivalent of several million dollars.

Her business acumen led her to be one of the first American women to become a self-made millionaire. She was also known for her philanthropic endeavors, including a donation toward the construction of an Indianapolis YMCA in 1913.

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"I had to make my own living and my own opportunity. But I made it! Don't sit down and wait for the opportunities to come. Get up and make them."

— Madam C.J. Walker



Left, Braxton Hobson. Right, Hobson (center) is pictured alongside his family. Submitted Photos

Braxton Hobson’s Journey from Student to ‘Mr. B’

BY LYNDESEY SUMMERS
lsummers@mckenziebanner.com

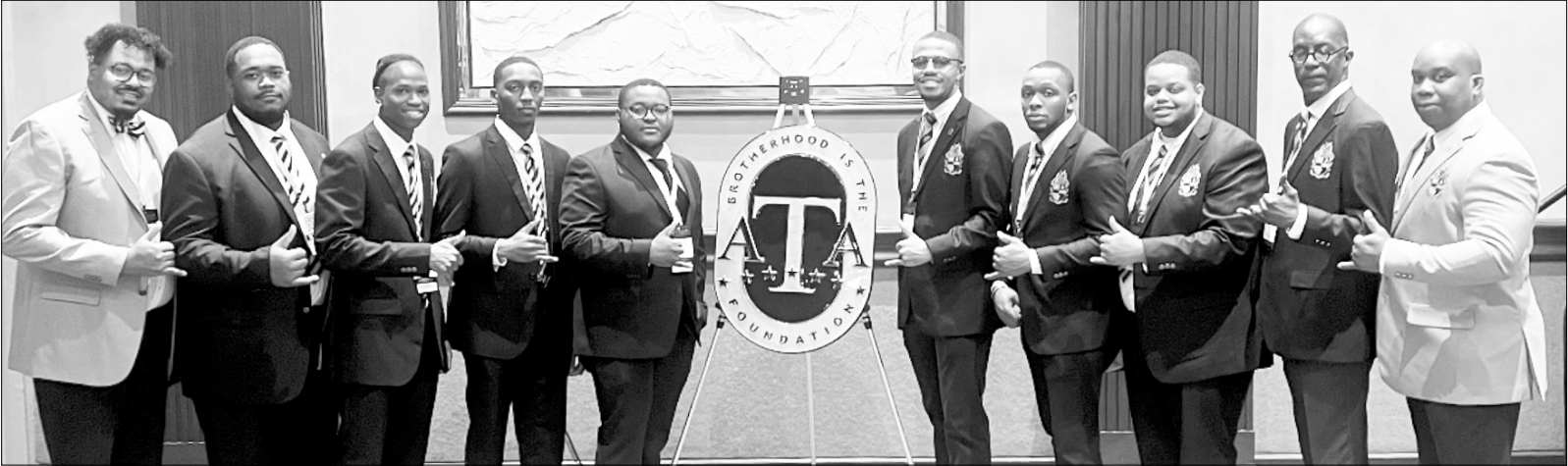
Braxton Hobson can pinpoint the exact moment he realized he wanted to be a teacher.

He was a senior at McKenzie High School, watching his teachers interact with him and his classmates, when a thought suddenly struck him: those same teachers had taught and inspired hundreds of students before, and they would continue impacting hundreds more even after he left the school. Somewhere in that realization, Hobson knew he wanted to be part of that legacy.

Six years later, now nicknamed “Mr. B” by hundreds of McKenzie Middle School students, Hobson stands at the front of a seventh-grade English classroom in the same school he once attended, just down the hall from his former teachers. He now bears the same responsibilities as his mentors, but he has a slightly different perspective.

Hobson grew up surrounded by people who understood what it meant to invest in others. The youngest child of Craig and Renee Hobson, he learned from an early age that investing in the people around him wasn’t a choice so much as a way of life. His father preaches at St. John Baptist Church and works in human resources. His mother worked for years as a special education teacher and still runs a local tutoring program at Webb School, called Two Sisters and a Book. Hobson’s parents also made sure he and his siblings understood his family’s proximity to slavery and Jim Crow Laws.

Hobson’s great-grandfather was enslaved. His grandfather, Ralph Tate, lived through segregation. Hobson’s parents taught him to treat his family’s history not as a source of fear, but as vital information that has shaped his family’s



Above, Hobson (second from left) is pictured with his Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. brothers. Right, The Call Me MiSTER program at the University of Tennessee at Martin prepares young men from diverse backgrounds for a career in education. Hobson (right center) is seen alongside his Call Me MiSTER peers. Submitted Photos



story and affected how he carries himself through the world.

“We were taught from a very young age that the black experience is very different from others,” said Hobson. “We knew we needed to be really conscious about how we handled things.”

Knowing how to carry oneself is a lesson Hobson brings into his classroom every day, and one he hopes his students will carry out of it.

When it came time to choose a path after high school, Hobson found one that aligned with the values his parents had instilled. The Call Me MiSTER program at the University of Tennessee at Martin gave Hobson a path to becoming an educator. The program recruits young men of diverse backgrounds into the teaching profession on one foundational belief: that representation can help students connect in the class-

room. Hobson joined the Call Me MiSTER program in 2020, fresh out of McKenzie High School, alongside a handful of other prospective teachers.

“When you put a whole bunch of new guys in a room together, you start realizing the ways you’re different. You grow together. It was a very different feeling of motivation,” said Hobson. He and his cohort grew into a brotherhood.

The program opened him up to a side of his culture he’d never experienced. Growing up in McKenzie, close friendships with other young Black men had been rare. At UTM, surrounded by his cohort and later his brothers in Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., he encountered spoken word poetry, new music and new perspectives on what it meant to be a young Black man in America. His uncle had been a member of Alpha Phi Alpha before him, and the organization, whose

members include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., gave him a model of Black manhood rooted in service and community investment.

It was in that space that literature began to take on new meaning for Hobson. Poetry became key to his identity. In college, Hobson and his fraternity brothers would sit together and work through poems, searching for meaning between the lines. He began to see literature as something alive, something people had always used to make sense of struggle, joy and survival. “Invictus,” written by a man on his deathbed claiming mastery over his own fate, landed differently once he understood the story behind it. Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou took on a new weight. Hobson returned to books he had loved as a child and found entirely different stories living underneath the ones he remembered.

That widening of his own

world is precisely what he now wants to offer his students.

He plans to meet his students exactly where they are. He wants to teach them that the songs they listen to on the way to school, the lyrics they have memorized without thinking about why, are forms of poetry, that they come from the same tradition. He wants his students to see culture as something to be understood, not overlooked.

“At the end of the day, we’re all people,” said Hobson. “But just because we’re all people doesn’t mean we need to ignore our own history and our differences. I think that’s part of what makes us great as a people is understanding each other’s differences.”

After a brief teaching stint in Fulton County, Ky., Hobson returned to his hometown in 2025. He considers the 2025-26 school year his true first full year teaching. He is candid about still

learning the craft, still figuring out what sticks and what doesn’t, still leaning on mentors and listening to his students when something isn’t working. He wants his classroom to become a safe space for his students.

“I tell them to be completely honest with me 24/7,” he said. “I tell them, ‘If you don’t like what I’m doing, let me know. Let’s talk about it.’”

But his purpose has never wavered. He was poured into — by this community, by his family, by his fraternity, by the long line of people who came before him and carried far heavier burdens. Now it’s his turn to be a role model for the children in this community.

“History is the past, but right now we’re here,” Hobson said. As he continues his teaching career, Hobson wants to focus on making a difference in the present, encouraging his students to do the same.

“Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die,
life is a broken winged bird that cannot fly.”

Langston Hughes

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Left, Tremayne Johnson at On Tha One, a music school he founded. Center, Tremayne Johnson with his nieces Emari (left) and Janeya, students at his music school. Top Right, Johnson is pictured with Bethel Renaissance Percussion. Right, Tremayne Johnson with his mentor, friend and colleague, band director Keith Breeden. Submitted photos

Tremayne Johnson

Sowing the Seeds of Music, Faith and Resilience

Tremayne Johnson is a musician, composer, educator, mentor and business owner whose story is one of hard work, tenacity and resilience.

Johnson grew up in Smyrna, a small community outside of Huntingdon, in a family full of musicians.

He is the Director of Percussion for Bethel University's Renaissance, the Director of Music at Brooks Chapel Kingdom Harvest, the founder and owner of On Tha One School of Music and the owner of Masterworks Detail Shop. His career has also included studio work and composition.

As the first and only Director of Percussion, Johnson teaches and manages percussion across Renaissance's many programs and productions.

Renaissance Regiment, Bethel's answer to marching band, is one of the biggest lines on Johnson's agenda, but before its creation in 2015, there was Renaissance Revolution.

Revolution was the vision of Renaissance founder Peter Jeffrey, who wanted to do something unique. Johnson said, "He basically gave me a blank slate and said, 'This is what I'm thinking, but I'm going to put this in your hands.'"

What started with seven students grew within two years to nearly 70 kids performing as a full stage band with a small orchestra, horns and a full percussion line. Johnson wrote all of the arrangements.

Johnson laments that Revolution has gone by the wayside, but it's one of many experiences to come from Renaissance that he cherishes.

He recalled another, when he and some of his students contributed to David Phelps' chart-topping Southern Gospel album Freedom. "I was blessed to be able to write some percussion parts, and

our percussion line was featured on the album."

Johnson expressed his love for the annual Christmas with Renaissance, particularly the year that one show was performed at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center in Nashville.

Johnson championed the creation of the Renaissance Marching Invitational high school band competition.

Johnson said of recruitment, "That process to me, I don't recruit a kid to the idea of a university, I recruit a kid to the concept of life-changing events. I believe in sowing into that kid, them trusting me enough for me to help them to get to the next stage in their life. Because at the end of the day, that's the only thing that matters is the student."

"I don't necessarily look for that kid that might be the greatest. I like the underdog. I like that kid that has untapped potential. That's my calling card, I'm able to see something that they don't see in themselves. That's how I've been successful at Bethel."

Another big pillar of Johnson's life and career is church music.

"My mom and dad [Marilyn and Danny] are phenomenal singers and musicians, two of my biggest cheerleaders and inspirations. I grew up in a van traveling to churches and performing. I've been playing drums since I was two. As I got older, I started playing a little bit of piano. "I love teaching choir music. Getting them to understand that you've gotta set the table. That's what music does for ministry. It sets the table for the pastor to be able to move forward."

Johnson was part of the music program at Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church in Yuma for 12-15 years before becoming the Minister of Music at St. John #2 Baptist Church in Denmark, Tenn. for 12 years.

He's now the Director

of Music at Brooks Chapel Kingdom Harvest in South Fulton, where his uncle Jessie Webb leads the worship.

Johnson reiterated how deep church music runs through his blood. "Believe it or not, at one point in time, between my entire family, we serviced over 60 percent of the local churches in this area. My entire family is all musicians and singers."

Long before Renaissance Regiment, Johnson was a "band kid" at Hollow Rock-Bruceton Central. "I've been up under [longtime band director] Keith Breeden since fourth or fifth grade. I've literally been teaching bands since I was 15 or 16. I had a lot of inspiration there, Brian Lowe, Chris Abbott, Keith Breeden, Nancy Matheson, a lot of other people."

Indeed, Breeden and Johnson have a long history together. When Breeden left Bruceton for McKenzie, Johnson followed as an instructor, a role he continued for much of Breeden's tenure.

Band came naturally to someone from a family as musical as Johnson's. "It's band. You get out there, you learn your music, you make sure it's good to go. I enjoy it so much, because you get to see the growth. You get to hear the music when it's really bad, and then by the end of the year you've got this phenomenal product that's running like a well-oiled machine. I've been able to translate that well to what I'm currently doing."

Johnson carries a unique distinction in this area. He won a percussion championship both as a student and as an instructor. His Central Tigers won the title his junior year (1998), and Breeden's Marching Rebels won it in 2001 with a squad that included longtime Renaissance Director Matthew Holt, who would later recommend Johnson for the Bethel percussion position.

Never quite satisfied with his own status quo, Johnson has added private instruction to his repertoire in recent years, leading to the opening of On Tha One School of Music in McKenzie on January 1 of this year.

"The vision actually came as my brother [Ethan] was passing away. I told him I was going to open a music school, and he said, 'Duh, why are you not already doing it?'"

Longtime friends Jobina and Kenny Gordon provided Johnson a room to get started. He began with a couple of students and kept growing from there.

He said, "I attest my growth in the beginning with the vision that I cast with my brother. I was fortunate to be able to have a really in-depth conversation with him before he passed away."

Johnson's students now include Ethan's daughters, Emari and Janeya, fulfilling a promise made to his late brother.

On Tha One has 25-30 active students, with more on the waiting list. The staff includes eight instructors, and he plans to hire three or four more.

Lessons are available for nearly any instrument, including strings, percussion, winds and vocals.

Johnson plans to expand to more locations.

He also officially launched another venture on January 1, Masterworks Detail Shop at 534 N. Main Street in McKenzie.

The business employs six detailers, but Johnson has immediate plans to add some daytime detailers and mobile detailers. "We'll have mobile units that will be out. If you can't get to us at the brick-and-mortar, we'll come to you."

Just over a year after the loss of his brother, Johnson himself would stare into the face of death and confront the biggest challenge of his life.

On March 26, 2023, he fell off the stage at Brooks

QUOTE

"I've never missed a band camp... I taught all of my band camps laying down in the middle of the band room floor. [...] Those kids on the percussion line picked me up out of the truck every day and took me into band practice. Every day."

— Tremayne Johnson on his recovery after fracturing multiple vertebrae in his neck

Chapel during Sunday service. "I still can't tell you exactly what happened. I fell face-first, and my body burned."

Johnson had fractured multiple vertebrae, C3-C7, in his neck. Had the C2 been affected, he would have been paralyzed for life.

He said, "I made a promise to the Lord while I was laying in the hospital. The devil came to me and he wanted me to die. He wanted me to quit. I woke up screaming. 'I'm not going to do it.'"

I made a promise then, if you let me get out of this bed, I'm not going to play with it. Because I know I've got favor on my life. I understand. I get it."

Johnson had surgery that Thursday to fuse the affected vertebrae and began therapy immediately. By Saturday, he walked the floor with no cane or walker. By the next Tuesday, he walked three floors of the hospital, including the floor where his brother had died.

The neurologist and other doctors were in disbelief at the speed of his recovery. "Most people with a situation like this don't recover that fast," he said. Johnson was out of the hospital in less than two weeks.

Renaissance Regiment camp started a couple of months later. Johnson noted, "I've never missed a band camp... I taught all of my band camps laying down in the middle of the band room floor."

Johnson faced another health scare the next year when he nearly lost a foot to diabetes. "I was stubborn, I didn't think it was that bad. I taught nine days of camp outside in a walking boot on a cane. I was going septic. Those kids on the percussion line picked me up out of the truck every day and took me into band practice. Every day. So you wonder why I have so much respect for those guys over there, because they've been there with me. I'd be hollering and jumping on them, and they're the ones holding me up. They would take me out there to yell at them."

He credits the Center for Wound Healing in Paris for saving his foot, though he had a toe amputated. Another year later, in the summer of 2025, Johnson had a minor surgery on

his other foot, putting him in a boot for another camp season.

He said, "I've been through a lot. Your average bear would have quit, but I don't consider myself an average bear. There's no quit in me. And I'm not going to let you quit on me. If we start together, we're not going to quit. Just part of it. That's one of the things I live by."

He cited a few figures who have inspired him over the years.

He credits educator Mr. Ivory Adkisson with showing him the importance of having Black educators in the classroom. "The absence of the African-American educator in your rural public schools is what causes a lot of issues. It's because there's not enough of us that are being seen to get any kind of understanding."

Johnson continued, "One of my big inspirations as far as understanding Black History was [the late] Mr. Alvin Fields. He was our manager when my parents had our family group and he was really big into the civic leagues and everything Black. He was a very big inspiration as far as understanding who I was as a young Black kid. At the time, I didn't realize that the seeds that he was sowing into me would be something that would come to fruition later."

"And Mr. Joe Jones, who used to work with my dad. When I first got the job at Bethel, he was one of the ones that I talked to daily. He really gave me some words of encouragement on moving forward, how to handle myself, how to carry and conduct myself. He took care of me. He really sowed seeds into me."

He also cited his family, particularly his parents and uncles, including his pastor, and Holt.

Johnson said, "My main goal in life is to sow seeds. I'm gonna sow seeds into any and every thing that I can get my hands on. When I'm gone, when it comes time for you all to put me in the ground, I want it to be to the point where you have to have my funeral on the football field."

Johnson, 45, has three sons, Zayveon Johnson, Korvelle Johnson and Boston Johnson; a daughter, Da'Shauna Parker; and four grandsons.

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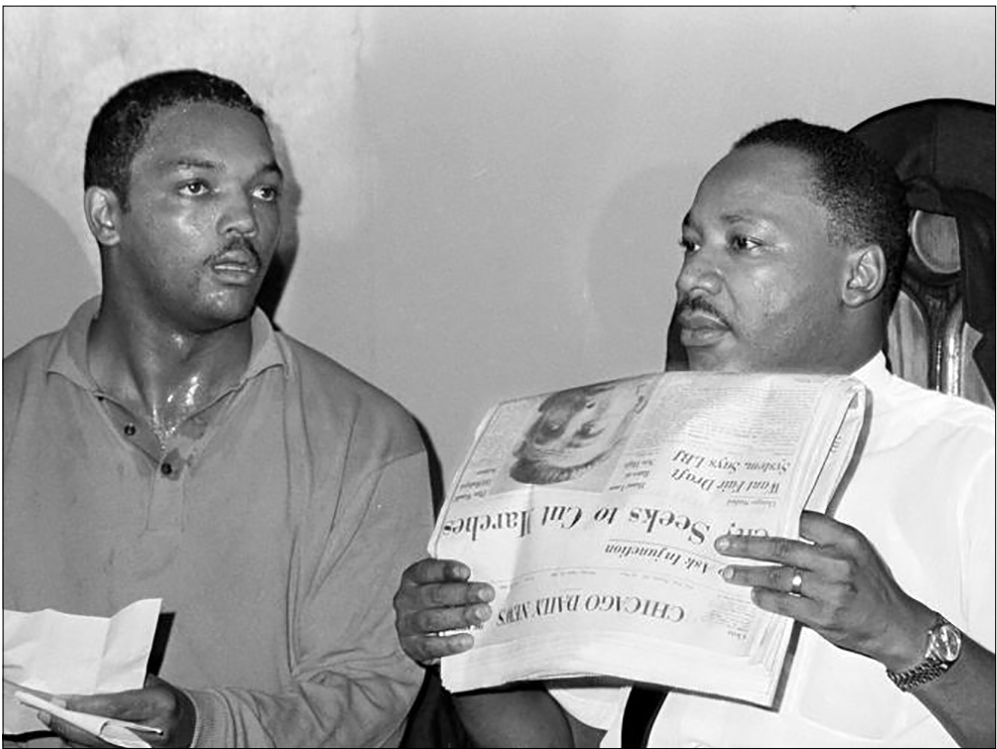
1941 — 2026

BY LYNDSAY SUMMERS
lsummers@mckenziebanner.com

America said goodbye to Reverend Jesse Jackson on Tuesday, February 17. The prominent civil rights leader, who reminded the country to “keep hope alive” in a 1988 Democratic National Committee speech, died at 84 after a long journey with a progressive neurological disease.

Born in 1941 in Greenville, South Carolina, Jackson became an advocate against racial injustice at an early age. His early work includes organizing with the Congress of Racial Equality, participating in marches and sit-ins. He was one of the eight African Americans involved in a sit-in at the Greenville Public Library, later arrested for “disorderly conduct.”

During his divinity studies at the Chicago Theological Seminary, Jackson began rallying support for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Jackson joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to work alongside King full-time, shortly after participating in the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery march



Left, Reverend Jesse Jackson, photographed in 1983. Above, Reverend Jesse Jackson (left) is pictured with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (right) in Chicago on August 19, 1966.

in Alabama.

Jackson was at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis when King was assassinated in 1968. After King's death, Jackson's advocacy transformed. He resigned from SCLC and founded the organization People United to Save Humanity, or PUSH, in 1971. At first, PUSH worked to improve the economic conditions of Black communities in America. Later, the organization expanded into

politics, hosting a weekly radio show and presenting awards to Black people.

Jackson became the second Black person to make a bid for a nomination by a major party in 1984, running as a Democrat, but he never made it to a general election. His 1984 presidential bid prompted the launch of the National Rainbow Coalition, which advocated for social programs, voting rights and affirmative action. Jackson merged PUSH and the National Rainbow Coalition in 1996 to form the Rainbow PUSH Coalition.

Jackson won the Democratic primaries in five states and secured 18 percent of the total primary vote (80 percent of the Black vote) in the 1984 Democratic race. Four years later, his presidential bid picked up more support. He won 13 state primaries, including Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. Jackson doubled his primary votes from his first attempt, coming second in the 1988 Democratic race.

Jackson later became an elder statesman within the Democratic party.

Despite being diagnosed with progressive supranuclear palsy — a condition which shares features with Parkinson's disease — Jackson remained an outspoken advocate for civil rights.

He was arrested twice in 2021 over his objection to the Senate filibuster rule, and he appeared at the 2024 Democratic National Convention.

Jackson is survived by his wife, Jacqueline, and their children: Santita, Jesse Jr., Jonathan, Yusef, Jacqueline and Ashley. His legacy of activism will forever be ingrained in United States history.

Notable Firsts for Black Americans

The United States is shaped by the diverse population that calls the nation home. Black individuals are among the extraordinary contributors to the national fabric, and many have blazed trails, benefiting countless others as a result. Future generations may owe their opportunities to these pioneering individuals who have elicited change and opportunity. The following are some noteworthy Black Americans who made a lasting impact on the United States and even the globe.

Jackie Robinson

Sports fans can attest that the most universally recognized barrier broken in American sports occurred on April 15, 1947. That was when Jackie Robinson took to the baseball diamond to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson was the first Black athlete to participate in Major League Baseball in the modern era, during a time when Black players typically were restricted to the Negro Leagues. The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum says that Robinson was a central figure in the civil rights movement both on the diamond and beyond.

Shirley Chisholm

Elected to the U.S. Congress in 1968, Shirley Chisholm was the first Black woman to serve in such a role. She represented New York's twelfth congressional district, and four years later, threw her hat into the national arena. Chisholm was the first woman to seek the nomination for President of the United States from a major party. Residents of Brooklyn can visit Shirley Chisholm State Park, which abuts the Belt Parkway and Pennsylvania Avenue.

Hattie McDaniel

An accomplished actress, Hattie McDaniel was the first Black person to win an Academy Award, earning it for Best Supporting Actress in 1940 for her role as “Mammy” in “Gone With the Wind.” Despite this groundbreaking achievement for a Black artist, she was not allowed to sit with her white castmates during the ceremony. McDaniel paved the way for Sidney Poitier, who won the award for Best Actor in 1964, and later Halle Berry, who won Best Actress in 2002.

Benjamin O. Davis, Sr.

On October 25, 1940, Davis was promoted to

Brigadier General, becoming the first Black American General Officer in the U.S. Army. The U.S. Army Center of Military History says his promotion occurred just before the U.S. entered World War Two, and was a significant step toward racial integration in the armed forces. Davis' son, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., commanded the Tuskegee Airmen, the first Black American military pilots.

Barack Obama

Forty-three white men preceded Barack Obama in holding the highest office in the country as President of the United States of America. Obama was inaugurated as the forty-fourth president on January 20, 2009, and remained in office until 2017. He was the first Black man to become president, defeating Senator John McCain, and later, Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. Obama's historic terms may have set the course for the vice presidency of Kamala Harris, who became the first Black American and first Asian American vice president in 2021.

Many Black individuals have helped to shape the United States, setting an example Americans from all backgrounds can follow.

Color A Masterpiece

Mary Winston Jackson

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Studied the boundary layers of air around airplanes

Science & Service

Mary Winston Jackson was an American mathematician and aerospace engineer. In 1958, she became the first African-American female engineer to work at NASA. Her contributions to Project Mercury were highlighted in Margot Lee Shetterly's book, "Hidden Figures," which was made into a film in 2016, highlighting Jackson alongside fellow NASA mathematicians Katherine Johnson and Dorothy Vaughan. As Jackson's daughter Carolyn Lewis said, "She was a scientist, humanitarian, wife, mother, and trailblazer who paved the way for thousands of others to succeed, not only at NASA, but throughout this nation."

Did You Know?

Black History Month has a lengthy history that dates back more than a century. According to History.com, historian Carter G. Woodson and minister Jesse E. Moorland founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in September 1915. Promoting the achievements of Black Americans was among the various missions of the ASNLH. One of the ways the ASNLH sought to achieve that mission was through the establishment of Negro History Week in 1926. Organizers chose the second week of February for the event because that week happened to be when Abraham Lincoln (1809) and Frederick Douglass (1818) were born. Lincoln and Douglass played pivotal roles in the abolition of slavery in the United States. After the establishment of Negro History Week in 1926, more and more cities began to celebrate it. History.com notes that by the 1960s Negro History Week had evolved into Black History Month on college campuses, eventually leading to formal recognition of the event by American president Gerald Ford in 1976

“Life is not a spectator sport. If you’re going to spend your whole life in the grandstand just watching what goes on, in my opinion, you’re wasting your life.”

— Jackie Robinson

“In recognizing the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute.”

— Thurgood Marshall

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“If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” — Shirley Chisholm



Left, Carlton Townes (second from left) represented Tennessee DECA at the State Capitol, where he and other students met State Representative Tandy Darby. Right, A young Carlton Townes (center) is pictured with his older brother, Lorenzo Townes, and his great-grandmother, Marsha “Mimi” Townes. Lorenzo and Mimi both made lasting impacts on Townes’ life. Submitted photos

Carlton Townes *Leading With an Open Heart*

BY LYNDSY SUMMERS
lsummers@mckenziebanner.com

At just 18 years old, Carlton Townes is already taking the city of McKenzie by storm.

As a high school senior, the first African American Tennessee DECA Vice President of Marketing from his town and the organizer behind McKenzie’s first-ever Community Prayer Service, Townes had a busy 2025. Luckily for McKenzie, the young man doesn’t plan to slow down.

When asked what it means to make history, Townes turned the focus away from himself. He talked about the students watching him. He talked about family. He talked about what it means for someone younger to see what he’s done and decide they can be the first to do something, too.

He wants his success to be a mirror for the kids coming up behind him — proof that they can be the first in their family to attend college, land a certain job or chase something bigger than what they see around them. He wants them to look at someone from their own town, from their side of the tracks, and know it’s possible to exceed expectations.

Before receiving any title or winning any election, Townes’ sense of purpose was shaped by the support he received from his family.

“In order for me to run in my life, there were people who came before me who had to take tiny steps,” Townes said. “My grandmother walked so that we could run. Her mother walked so she could run. In my family, there’s always been someone who had to walk in order for the next person to be able to run.”

Townes’ great-aunt clips every newspaper article written about him and calls to read it aloud. “Our boy done been in the paper again,” she’d say.

When he was considering whether to run for DECA state officer, it was his great-grandmother, Marsha “Mimi” Townes, he talked it through with — and prayed with before making his decision.



Carlton Townes. Photo by Amy Bourne/Amy Bourne Photography

Mimi died on January 8 of this year after a brief illness. Townes carried her illness through December, the hardest month he can remember. Her death shifted something in him.

“Bringing in the first of the year with my grandma being in the hospital, it really tore me at me,” said Townes. “I mean, that’s my girl. That’s my rock. Everybody has their girlfriends or friends or besties or pals that just bring out the best in them. Well, that’s my grandmother.”

Going into a monumental year, Townes was especially crushed.

“Some people would have been angry with God,” said Townes. “I was angry, but then I became more at peace with it. I’m at peace because I don’t have to worry about her hurting anymore. But I’m still kind of mad. Why couldn’t He just let her see me graduate, or let her be at this next community prayer service, or be at my farewell for DECA in February?”

But even in his grief, Townes found peace and a sense of heightened purpose. His great-grandmother endured a time of segregation, gave up her own education opportunities and laid down a path for her family. Mimi led her life with love, leaning on God and becoming a strength for her family. Townes wanted to be a reflection of her even after her death.

“I feel like, every single day, there’s parts of her that I see in me now,” said Townes. “The love that my grandmother had that she poured into me is what I like to pour into everybody.”

Townes doesn’t care where someone comes from, what they believe or what labels they carry. He wants to know people as they are.

“You can put the worst person in front of me,” he says, “and I want to know them for who they are.”

That mindset led him to organize McKenzie’s first Community Prayer Service in September 2025, centered on unity. He reached out

QUOTE

“In order for me to run in my life, there were people who came before me who had to take tiny steps.”

— Carlton Townes

across churches, counties and communities, inviting anyone who wanted to come. Black or white. Republican or Democrat. Regular churchgoer or someone who hasn’t prayed in years.

A projected 185 people attended the first community event at McKenzie’s downtown Veteran’s Park.

Now Townes is planning a second service, scheduled for March 1 at McKenzie’s Park Theatre, focused on “Seasons of Life.” It will include speakers, praise and worship and a symbolic chain-breaking exercise he encountered at a youth camp in Florida — an opportunity for participants to release whatever is holding them back.

The theme feels especially personal for Townes this time around. He’d been planning the service through the grief of losing Mimi, pushing through exhaustion and self-doubt. He’d also recently come to the realization that it has been almost five years since he lost his older brother, Lorenzo Townes. Two of his biggest inspirations, the people who made him into the young man he is today, are gone.

“God knew what he was doing leading me to this topic,” he said, “because now I’m able to talk with people about it.”

Townes is equally honest about what it costs to move through the world the way he does. He was among those who received racist threatening text messages that circulated in the region last year.

“I was so terrified,” he said. “I didn’t want anyone to think of me differently.”

He speaks plainly about inequities he has seen — underfunded schools in majority-Black counties, teachers stretched thin,

young people written off before they’ve had a chance.

He notes how his aunt, who works at McKenzie Housing Authority, tells every child who comes through that they are going to be somebody someday. It’s a detail that inspires him.

“The thought that just because you’re Black, you can’t be great — that should not be a thing,” he says. “Everyone has the potential to be great.”

When he faces prejudice, his response is to work harder and want more — for McKenzie, for Carroll County, for the world.

That drive recently took him beyond McKenzie. Just days before his interview with The Banner, Townes returned from a DECA trip that included meetings at the state capitol, where he spoke with legislators about career and technical student organizations and their impact on Tennessee students. He admitted the moment felt intimidating, even more so when State Representative Tandy Darby (R-Greenfield) referred to him as “Mr. McKenzie.”

“I was like, wait a minute — I’m talking to state senators and representatives,” he said with a laugh. “As long as I didn’t have to talk to the governor, I was fine.”

Looking ahead, Townes plans to study nursing, pursue certification as a nurse midwife and eventually earn a degree in hospitality and tourism. He hopes one day to open a hotel in McKenzie and bring economic opportunity home.

But that’s the long game. Right now, Townes is focusing on finishing high school.

Asked whether he ever imagined being here, he laughed and shook his head. “I never imagined myself being a state DECA officer. I never imagined having this kind of impact on my community,” he said, then paused. “Give me ten more years. Let’s see where God takes me.”

Mimi and Lorenzo walked so Carlton could run. Now he’s running — and clearing a path for whoever comes next.

“Grandparents can do more for us than anyone else in the world; they sprinkle stardust in our eyes.” — Alex Haley, author of Roots

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH

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