

Integration pioneer returns to Smithfield

A drive to succeed kept Rhonda McLean focused amid the turmoil of the '60s

BY PEGGY LIM
STAFF WRITER

To Rhonda Joy McLean, North Carolina is home to memories both fond and humiliating.

McLean, a Yale Law School graduate and associate general counsel of Time Inc., will speak today in honor of Black History Month. In the dialogue sponsored by the Smithfield-Selma Alumni Association, McLean will revisit her experiences as one of four black students who integrated Smithfield High School.

It was the fall of 1965 — 11 years after Brown v. Board of Education had decreed racial segregation in schools unconstitutional. Johnston County, like many districts across the South,

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had dragged its feet in offering black students the option of enrolling in all-white schools until after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

McLean was a good candidate to be among the first. Not only was she musically talented, she also was smart enough to have skipped grades. Her college-educated parents, natives of Chicago and Buffalo, N.Y., had been recruited in the 1950s to teach music in Jim Crow schools in North Carolina.

“My parents went to integrated schools all their life, so it was no big whoop to them,” McLean said.

Her surrogate grandmother, Cora Boyd, a neighbor who taught her to read when McLean was 3, also encouraged her to seize the opportunity. Boyd, the superintendent of the county’s black schools, knew the books, lab equipment and course offerings were better at the white schools. “She was hopeful those of us who were good students would represent our people in a dignified way and in academic prowess,” McLean said.

But no one had any idea what would be in store for the students

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Rhonda Joy McLean, shown in 1965 and today, was one of the first black students at Smithfield High School. She is a Yale law graduate.

IF YOU GO

Rhonda Joy McLean will speak at 2 p.m. today at First Missionary Baptist Church, 403 Caswell St., Smithfield. The event is free. Questions? Call 934-5501.



Smithfield High School was integrated in 1965, but the first four black students encountered a hostile principal and threats of violence from classmates.

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INTEGRATION

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when they walked into school that first day in 1965.

McLean, then 13, remembers a sheriff with a shotgun, a hostile principal and hundreds of white students in the school's hallways, some jeering and spitting: That September, the Ku Klux Klan also staged a side-walk march in downtown Smithfield, followed by a rally and cross-burning in Clayton, according to "Johnston County: Its History Since 1746."

During that first year, the black students — three girls and one boy — received threats in their lockers. "Get the hell out of our town!" or "We'll kill you!" — the messages read, McLean said.

Once, girls taunted her when she was naked in a locker room stall. Awash in shame, McLean couldn't stop crying until the school sent for her father to pick her up. Another time, someone sprayed paint on her locker so she couldn't turn the combination lock. Nobody would do anything, including the principal, McLean said. Eventually, her father cut open the lock.

A hostile sign

In 1967, stirred up by the changing makeup of schools, the Klan put up a billboard at the entrance of town that read: "This is KLAN

Country ... Help fight Communism & Integration!"

Wingate Lassiter, whose father wrote editorials in The Smithfield Herald against segregation, said the sign became an embarrassment to the town.

"Smithfield was typical of a southern town," said Lassiter, director of the Johnston County Heritage Center. "But it was far from a Klan haven."

Still, the sign became a notorious symbol of Smithfield because of its prominence — thousands of beachgoers passed it every weekend on the way to the coast, Lassiter said.

McLean felt invigorated by the civil rights movement, and the ministers and university activists who visited her church. Because she was too young to protest in Alabama and Mississippi, the best way she thought she could contribute was to do well in school. When she suffered harsh treatment, she kept it to herself.

"Our parents were so proud of us," she said. "We did not want them to feel they had made a mistake."

And between the darker moments, McLean remembers bright spots, including the students who spoke to her in class or invited her to participate in theatrical productions. She recalls teacher Janice Browning, who was brave enough to let her join the chorus her freshman year. Half the girls in chorus left after McLean joined. But Browning

treated her well: She asked her to be her accompanist and recommended her for a weeklong program at UNC-Chapel Hill. Browning drove McLean there herself that summer.

And her junior-year history teacher, John Floyd, allowed her to make an impromptu speech after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. After a student prayer vigil for King, for which the principal had threatened expulsion, McLean returned to class. Students laughed as others said "Your king is dead" or "Your boyfriend is dead."

A breaking point

Something snapped in McLean. She talked that whole class period about the contributions black people had made as artists, architects, writers. The white students listened.

Over time, McLean said, she and her friends came to realize the students that treated them the worst were often poor, whites who themselves were not treated well by wealthier students or who were unlikely to finish school.

McLean could also find solace in her mother, Georgianna McLean, who became the high school's first African-American teacher and went on to be an institution in the county with an award-winning choral program.

peggy.lim@newsobserver.com
or (919) 836-5799