
BLESSED WITH LONGEVITY

SEPTEMBER 13, 2020

In recent months, we have all seen things on the news and on our social media that have disturbed us, challenged us, and made us go “hmmm.” Back in June, I scrolled upon something that made me excited and gave me great hope. Just as I wondered what the future would hold and, to a degree, if there would be a future, I saw that a family friend was celebrating his father’s birthday. His father wasn’t celebrating a milestone like 65 or 80, or even 100. His father was celebrating his 102nd birthday. I was taken aback, somewhat, having not seen or spoken with a centenarian in quite a few years. I wanted to speak with this gentleman and share some of the amassed years of knowledge with others. I scheduled a time to go visit. As I looked into his eyes with awe, I wished him the happiest of birthdays, and asked him how he enjoyed his birthday party. He said, “Oh my, it was so many cars,” he motioned, “it looked like a funeral procession all the way up the street!” I laughed, but I certainly didn’t expect him to say that!

Mr. Johnny McKinney was born in 1918, the same year of the last pandemic. He says he was born in Rock Hill, SC, just a few miles from where he lives now. He and his family were sharecroppers who “picked cotton, corn and everything else that had to be picked.” They lived and worked on several different farms in the area - Nanny Mountain in Clover, a farm near Rawlinson Road, and one near Westend. He remembers watching the paving of Cherry Road in 1928, which was the same year his mother died. He recalls how the wooden plank bridge across the Catawba River was converted into a new, concrete bridge. He said it was amazing to watch such progress, although his family didn’t have a car or even a buggy. His grandfather, he recalls, had a horse. Mr. McKinney is the oldest of four children. Currently, he has a sister, Mrs. Ruby Leech who lives in Gastonia, NC and sadly, he buried a sister, Mrs. Pearlina Thomasson last week. He recalls speaking with her the day before she celebrated her 100th birthday in July, then the following week when they talked, she said she had taken sick.



I must say I was shocked to hear of her passing, as when I first met him in June, he was excited that his sister would be celebrating her 100 birthday in just a few weeks. He describes their relationship as being, “Very close. I never had any trouble with her and she never had any trouble with me.” When asked to share a memory of her, he thought about it, removed his glasses and said, “Well, you see Pearlina was a little hard-headed. Not in a bad way, but she did what she wanted to do knowing she was gonna get a beatin’. And when she cried, I just

cried with her.” He shared that years ago, when they were in their teens they walked home from church on a Sunday evening, and another young man wanted to walk with her. When they got close to home, he suggested that the young man go on to his house, but Peraline wanted him to walk all the way to their house. “When Papa seen it, I knew it was gonna be trouble.” She said, “well the other girls walk with boys.” Papa said, “Well, I’m not raising the other girls, I’m raising you.” He said Pearlina got in big trouble that night. Mr. McKinney recalls that it was that night he told her, “I said, if you gonna keep on being hard-headed you ought to at least think about sneaking.” He laughed, then he paused, “It’s hard to think about she’s dead now.” His close neighbor, Mr. Alfred Culp intervened. “It’s just her body that’s dead, and a body ain’t worth nothing any way. When you look at a body in the casket, it can’t smile, say nothing funny, it’s



nothing, ashes to ashes dust to dust right, that’s worthless. You have all these years of memories. She’s not gone. She’s right here. Every time you think about her, she’s here, I saw you smiling as you told that story. You know why, because she’s not gone. She’s right here every time you think about her, or anybody else that’s dead, it’s just their body, their spirit, never dies.”

Mr. McKinney’s memory is remarkable. He recalls names and years amazingly well. As an adult, he first worked as a janitor at the York General Hospital. As he described it, he was more than a janitor, he was also involved with assisting the doctors and nurses. One of the doctors thought he and four other men should be trained to do this work, so he developed a plan to teach them some skills of the trade, making Mr. McKinney, one of 5 trained Orderly’s in Rock Hill. He says he is the only one still living today. Not only did he transport meals, he transported patients, he bathed them, shaved them for surgery, and sometimes he just talked to them and prayed with them when that was what they needed.

Later, in 1956, he lived in Newport, SC, he was married, and had three children. In addition to working as an Orderly, he worked for the Rock Hill School District as a janitor. He had walked five or six miles to work at the hospital, but arrived late, and his supervisor wasn’t happy. “My supervisor said, ‘Look, Johnny, you gonna have to get you a car.’ I looked at him like he was crazy, I had never even thought about a car. I hadn’t even ridden in but a few cars.” He paused, “As my shift ended, my supervisor said, ‘come on here with me, Johnny, I got a car I want you to buy.’ He drove me over to Anderson’s and looked at a 1939 Plymouth. My supervisor talked to the man and told me the price. I looked at him and said, ‘that’s not bad, but I don’t know how to drive.’ He said he would teach me.” Now he cleared his throat. “So, that night I told my wife about it, but she didn’t put too much stock in it, until the next night when the man from Anderson came and picked him up to teach him how to drive.” He laughed as he thought back. “It took three nights of driving lessons for me to learn enough to pass the test at the highway department. They gave me a little, tin card with my name stamped into it and you ain’t never seen a fellow more proud. I still got that old license in the house somewhere. I went home that night in my new car, which was a old car, but I got my wife and kids and we went for

a ride up Cherry Road.” He motioned, “I was happy as a lark. I could finally be independent. I didn’t have to walk everywhere or try and find a ride. That car changed my life.”

Mr. McKinney has been a faithful member of Pineville AME Zion church since he was sixteen years-old. He said, “I don’t think they’ll throw me out now.” He says he loves his church and church family. He says there is no one he hates, and no one he has ever hated. “I just treat people like I wish to be treated. Everybody has faults, so if someone’s faults don’t line up with how I like to live, then I just leave them alone, they’ll straighten up, directly. I don’t do anything bad to them. About his longevity, he says, “I thank God for allowing me to still be here. I could have been anywhere, but I’m here. I thank God for that.”

Mr. McKinney’s children grew up to serve their community well. His oldest son, Johnny, entered the Army, then he taught high school Biology, and became an Assistant Principal. He now lives in Brunswick, GA. His son James Howard served in the Army, then opened his own insurance company. He is now retired and lives in Sumter, SC. His youngest, child, Mattie, is a retired high school teacher in Charlotte, NC. She taught Business Law, Business Math, and Intro to Computers.



As we continue to navigate through this pandemic, I was blessed to have had the opportunity to speak with Mr. John McKinney. He has been navigating new normals for more years than most. While we continue to want things to return to normal, it’s important to realize that it may not happen. Rather than looking back, we must continue to look forward to the things that are to come. I’m old enough to know that every good thing doesn’t come without setbacks. Mr. McKinney talked about his family’s first lightbulb hanging from a wire in the kitchen. “We were so proud of that light! That light meant we were improving!” He laughed. While it was an improvement, it came with a bill. Mr. McKinney, in his years, has seen more births than he can count, and he has probably seen many of those people grow up, live a full life then pass away. He’s been hurt by those losses, but he has persevered. He is grateful to God for sparing his life this long. He doesn’t talk as if he knows what the future holds, because he doesn’t, and neither do we, but we can be assured, the future is good because we know Who holds the future.