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Spelman grad turns 100 in style

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A couple of weeks ago, Josephine Jones marked her 100th birthday.

To some, that kind of longevity might not seem all that remarkable by today's standards. But Mama Jones, as friends affectionately refer to her, almost didn't make it.

Just a year or so ago, she was withering away in a nursing home, hoping to regain some semblance of her old life.

Sure, she was up in years. But she had lived her entire life alone, and she was proud of it. She bragged about having bought her own home without the help of a man the same way she boasted of being the oldest living graduate of Spelman College — every chance she got.

She longed to return to her former life, even though a fall in the nursing home made her return to independence questionable.

Then a friend, Jacqueline Carlisle-James, came to her rescue.

Carlisle-James hired attorney Louis Levenson to petition the court for Mama Jones' release. The light had gone out of her eyes and any hint of the vibrant, community-minded woman she'd been had gotten up and left.

She seemed closer to 120 than 100 then, Levenson said. Had Carlisle-James not intervened, he believes Mama Jones would've died.

She was born and raised in Atlanta's Fourth Ward, where she was active in her beloved Wheat Street Baptist Church and a Sunday school classroom bears her name.

After high school, she enrolled at Spelman. When the Depression hit, she was forced to drop out for one semester. But she returned more determined than ever to graduate.

She did in 1929, then she left to take a teaching job in North Carolina. Black people couldn't get jobs like that here, she said.

Ten years later, she returned to Atlanta and, for the next 32 years, taught in the Atlanta and Butts County public school systems.

She had plenty of suitors, she said, but she never married. Carlisle-James is the closest she's ever gotten to having children.

The women met about 20 years ago outside a local mall. Carlisle-James might not have noticed the elderly woman except Mama Jones was wearing a sweater in the middle of summer.

Carlisle-James offered to give her a ride home. Jones accepted, and the two became best friends. Carlisle-James, now 60, enjoyed the time she spent with Jones, soaking up all the history inside of her. Her grandchildren doted on Mama Jones, too.

After Jones was placed in a nursing home, Carlisle-James continued to visit. But she was concerned about the nursing home's effect on the independent Mama Jones. So she called Levenson.

"Most of us assume if you're 100, you should be stowed away in a nursing home to die," Levenson said. "Ms. Jones refused to accept that sentence."

Associate Probate Judge Ann Jackson agreed Mama Jones would be better off in Carlisle-James' care.

Too often, lawyers preside over tragedy, Levenson said. "This story was triumph that the legal system can be proud of."

That was a year ago, and Mama Jones is back to her old self again, correcting Carlisle-James' grandchildren's grammar and spelling, telling them stories about the Depression, the Atlanta fire of 1918 and the suitor she almost married.

Her eyesight is failing now, her hair as white as snow, but her skin is as smooth as a baby's bottom.

She concedes her mind isn't as sharp as it used to be — she forgets. But, rather than misspeak, she stops and asks for an assist from Carlisle-James, keeper of many of her memories. Jones says her mama always told her to never lie.

That's the secret, by the way, to her longevity, Jones said. "They might forget the truth, but folk don't forget the lie you tell."

On this day, Mama Jones is having no problems remembering anything about the birthday celebration Carlisle-James just held in her honor.

It was a star-studded occasion. More than 100 guests were there, including talk radio host Frank Ski, Levenson and, of course, a few Spelman women, who presented her with a "golden girl" watch. Radio jock Tom Joyner and U.S. Rep. John Lewis sent best wishes.

"It was wonderful," Mama Jones said, smiling.

The celebration, though, didn't end there. The following day at City Hall, City Council President Lisa Borders, a former Sunday school student of Jones, issued a proclamation in honor of her 100th birthday.

Jones was beside herself, happy so many people loved and appreciated her.

A week later, she was still talking about all the fanfare: "I really enjoyed it." Then, "Are you a Spelman girl?"

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