

Posted on Fri, Apr. 20, 2012

Tribute | Geneva Bailey was a fountain of wisdom

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Special to The Star



Who: Geneva Bailey, 86, of Kansas City, Kan.

When and how she died: March 23 of natural causes.

Rock of Gibraltar: Geneva's childhood ended when she was 12. That's when her mother died, leaving the girl, not a woman yet, to take her place. "They all looked up to her as their mother. She was pushed into that role," said her son Timothy Bailey. "It would be tough for anyone, but for a 12-year-old, it is just amazing."

After graduating from Sumner Academy, she studied at Kansas City Community College. She met Charles Buford Bailey at the Eighth Street Baptist Church in Kansas City, Kan., and they married in 1947. Their union lasted 62 years.

A devoted wife, Geneva became a devoted mother with the birth of their first child. Three more children followed. Geneva remained home to feed, clean and nurture them while Charles served as pastor of Salem Baptist Church. Their third- and fourth-born still were little when Geneva received her bachelor's degree in theology from Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

No barriers: Geneva's daughter Nozella Brown remembers her older brother crossing town to attend a school for African-Americans instead of the school near their home. Geneva worked three years to get him in a nearby school. "That was just her way," Nozella said. "She didn't believe there should be any barriers and didn't let on to us that there were."

When the children were at school, Geneva studied, attended classes and taught Sunday school. She loved to read and had a knack for spotting people who couldn't. She'd quietly offer help. They came to her home, where they learned to read using the newspaper. "I don't know anybody else with that passion," Nozella said.

Geneva fought for her own education as well. Her high school grades were less than stellar, since she worked evenings as a short-order cook through school. With persistence, she got into Park College and graduated with honors. "She always believed that no matter what, you could overcome it. She had a desire to learn," Nozella said.

The youngest of her children was well into elementary school when Geneva became a middle school teacher in the Kansas City, Kan., School District, where she taught 14 years before retiring in 1987. That year she received a master's degree in education from Kansas State University.

"She set her own legacy," said Tony Carter, who followed Charles as pastor of Salem Baptist Church. "She was a very kind, sweet and gentle person. She was a joy to be around." A gentle, Christian woman: Too poor to have books as a child, Geneva was always giving books away as an adult. "I think at some point everybody had received a book from her," Timothy said. Added Tony: "She was very serious about Christian education, so much that she shared books with practically everyone in the congregation."

Words of wisdom: Geneva passed on her pearls of wisdom wherever she could. A few of her jewels: "You don't 'have' to do it. You 'get' to do it." "What parents allow in moderation, kids do in excess." "Since you can't remember not to slam the door, why don't you practice opening and closing the door until I get tired." Timothy's favorite was "If you don't have time to do it right, you will have time to do it over." It was one he practiced while completing household chores. Maturity has given him perspective and now he appreciates all his mother taught him.

"Life is certainly precious," he said. "You have to make use and take advantage of every moment you have."

Survivors include: Two sons, two daughters, six grandchildren, three great-grandchildren.