

Alicia McIlwain-Marks, 60, with a picture of her father, Roosevelt education pioneer Charles McIlwain, and the 1956 Chevy that he owned.

LINDA ROSIER

Heroes' unsung Black heroes

From parents to members of the clergy to teachers, these role models were more than impactful

BY CARA S. TRAGER
Special to Newsday

Across the country and here on Long Island, iconic Black heroes like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks and Maya Angelou are honored during Black History Month for their accomplishments and their legacy.

But there are other, lesser-known heroes as well, people who have quietly made an

impact within their communities and their families. People like Charlie Walters, who instilled in Marvin Smith a lasting commitment to serve others. Or Walter George Jones, whose heartfelt talks with daughter Renee Vaughans encouraged her to rise above the racism she encountered in school and focus on her studies.

Whether these unsung heroes guided these Long Island residents as children, teens or young adults, their actions and words have continued to res-



onate within them — far beyond their lifetimes.

According to Sandra Edmonds Crewe, dean and professor of social work at Howard University in Washington, D.C., the Black community abounds with personal “heroes and

heroes,” people who may not always get recognition but who command great respect as formal or informal mentors.

They are often faith-based teachers, members of the clergy, coaches, grandparents and any caregivers “who step in and give out the love and direction,” Crewe said. Often, she said, they are someone “who sees beyond what people don’t see for themselves.”

As Black History Month draws to a close, four older Black Long Islanders share the

ways their personal heroes have had a lasting impact on their lives.

GATEWAY TO MUSIC

Reynard Burns, a composer, musician, sheet-music publisher, guest conductor and retired orchestra teacher, entered the world of ivory keys, sharps and flats more than 72 years ago.

“My piano teacher, Arnetta Jones, was my hero,” said the

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Bayport resident, 77.

During the 13 years that Jones taught Burns on a grand piano in her spacious Harlem studio, Burns said Jones instilled within him the confidence to take on difficult musical works. She also exposed him to a wide range of composers and their musical styles, including Black musicians such as classical pianist Andre Watts, as well as the Russian composer, pianist and conductor Sergei Rachmaninoff and pianist Van Cliburn.

"It wasn't just Bach, Beethoven and Brahms," Burns said.

He still remembers Jones assigning him — at age 14 — the task of performing the piano score for Brahms' Concerto with a soloist. It was a challenge, he said, to memorize the piece and remain in sync with the other pianist.

"You didn't dare say, 'I can't do that,' but she felt I could do it, and it gave me confidence," Burns said.

Under Jones' tutelage, Burns said he won the National Guild of Piano Teachers' prestigious Paderewski Medal, the culmination of a 10-year program requiring participants to memorize and perform 10 different pieces of music annually, in addition to scales and arpeggios, to demonstrate technical facility. Winners had to receive a rating of superior each year. As part of the award, he was given a \$500 scholarship to the school of his choice, SUNY Potsdam.

Burns studied with Jones through 12th grade, while attending New York City's specialized High School of Music & Art. He then went on to Potsdam's music program.

As the years passed, he veered away from piano to bass but said he is forever grateful for a musical journey that Jones had motivated him to embark on.

"She taught me that music is something that meant a lot to me," Burns said. "I could sit down at a piano and express myself and play what I felt, even if it was just noise. And nothing did for me what music did."



Composer and retired orchestra teacher Reynard Burns credits his love of music to his hero, Arnetta Jones, right with Burns, far right, and his brother, Roland, in her Harlem studio.

“ [Arnetta Jones] taught me that music is something that meant a lot to me. I could sit down at a piano and express myself and play what I felt, even if it was just noise.” — Reynard Burns of Bayport

THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD REACH HIM

By his own admission, Marvin Smith was no saint during his early years. Among his offenses: He punched his sixth-grade teacher and got caught with a knife in high school.

"I didn't get into trouble all the time, but I was hardheaded and didn't listen," said the retired motivational speaker and trainer, 80, who lives in Central Islip.

But Deacon Charlie Walters, the Sunday school superinten-

dent at St. Paul Baptist Church in Brunswick, Georgia, "believed in me," said Smith. "And when I got into trouble, he was the only person who stopped me in my tracks because I respected him and the way he carried himself."

The deacon took Smith, then 17, under his wing by persuading the teen to join the church choir — even though "I couldn't carry a tune," Smith said. Walters also encouraged him to teach Sunday school, and when the deacon was

ready to step down from his position, Smith, then 19, ran for superintendent and won.

"He saw something in me that I didn't see in myself," Smith said. "There are many people in my life who I look up to, but Deacon Walters was always the best person in my ear."

And the deacon, who died in the early 1990s, has inspired Smith to pay his mentoring forward.

As a part-time employee with the Economic Opportu-

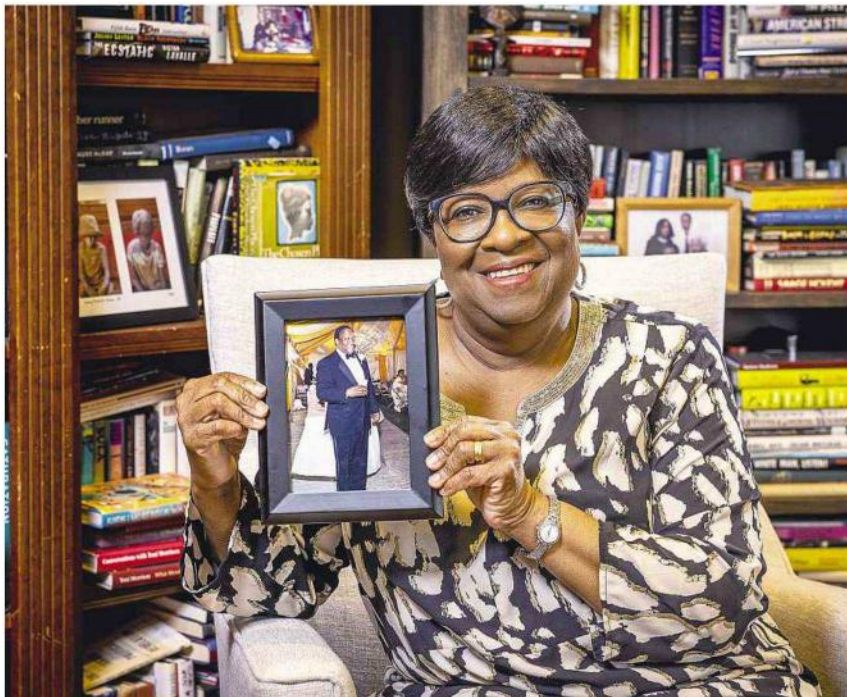


nity Council of Suffolk, Smith helps young people pursue a productive life upon reentering the community from a juvenile center. He also volunteers in several organizations, including as a mentor for My Brother's Keeper Alliance, which former President Barack Obama founded to help boys and young men of color achieve success, and as a van driver for his church, the New Jerusalem Baptist Church of Brentwood.

"Deacon Walters got me, and



The seeds of Marvin Smith's acts of service, like driving a van for New Jerusalem Baptist Church in Brentwood, were planted by Deacon Charlie Walters from St. Paul Baptist Church in Georgia.



Dix Hills resident Renee Vaughans holds a picture of her father, Walter George Jones, who instilled a work ethic and drive for education in his daughter and always lent an ear when Vaughans experienced racism and other difficulties.

for whatever reason, he had a lasting impact on my life," Smith said.

HER FATHER'S GIRL

For North Babylon resident Alicia McIlwain-Marks, 60, her father, Charles McIlwain, endures as her personal hero — for what he achieved and the role model he was for her and others.

McIlwain was the first Black teacher at Roosevelt High School. Starting as a math teacher, he went on to become

the longest-serving principal at Centennial Avenue Elementary School in Roosevelt. A ceremonial street name, Charles McIlwain Way on the corner of Nassau Road and Centennial Avenue, pays tribute to her father and his 34-year career within the Roosevelt Union Free School District, McIlwain-Marks said.

A native of Kannapolis, North Carolina, McIlwain was the son of a sanitation worker and a Cannon Mills factory employee. At age 16, he left

home to study at Livingstone College, a private, historically Black school in Salisbury, North Carolina, where he met his wife.

He often told McIlwain-Marks that since she was the oldest of their three children, she needed to set an example for the others to follow — a sentiment she took to heart. "All I wanted to do was make him proud," said McIlwain-Marks.

She would often read her school essays to him and she

also turned to her father for comfort when the going got rough, including the times she encountered problems with friends.

"He always made us feel that we were the stars of life," said McIlwain-Marks.

His belief in her abilities also helped when McIlwain-Marks was chosen to make announcements over her elementary school's public address system.

"He helped build my confidence, telling me I have a strong presence and speak well," McIlwain-Marks said. "I felt I was who he said I was."

As the owner of Amityville-based Marks of Excellence, a child-care development center that she founded 25 years ago, McIlwain-Marks said her father's encouragement continues to resonate with her. It has enabled her to speak publicly and confidently in professional settings.

Her father was also a hero to others, she said. "Recently, one of his former students came up to me and said, 'You're McIlwain's daughter, and he was my everything.'"

Despite a blizzard, his funeral in 2010 drew a long line of mourners, including a man who, after waiting for his turn to speak, haltingly conveyed that McIlwain had been there for him during his most challenging days growing up.

"That was my father," McIlwain-Marks said. "He didn't judge. He could fly with eagles and be on the ground. He only wanted to help, and he treated everyone with the utmost dignity and respect."

ROLE MODEL AGAINST RACISM

Renee Vaughans' father, Walter George Jones, remains her personal hero as well.

"He was talented without going through the process of a formal education," said the Dix Hills resident, 66.

Since Jones "didn't have a business or money to hand off," he always stressed — to Vaughans, her sister and two brothers — the importance of education and hard work to "move up in the world and get what you needed in life," she said.

A Bronx native and son of immigrants from St. Kitts, he dropped out of high school to help support his family. He then served in World War II and the Korean War.

Afterward, Jones was a porter for a real estate company that owned commercial

buildings in the city. He also performed maintenance work on the properties' heating and cooling systems, and undertook side jobs like repairing the air-conditioning of a tenant's synagogue. Although he worked six to seven days a week, he was "very present in our lives," Vaughans said, adding that he often brought his family with him to work.

Jones' labors — which ended with his death from heart failure 30 years ago at age 65 — enabled him to move the family out of public housing in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and buy a house in Wyandanch when Vaughans was 14. Embracing the community, Jones became president of the Wyandanch Police Athletic League's children's football league, and Vaughans' mother, Juanita, now 86, was president of the local library, spearheading its relocation from a trailer to a building.

Prior to the move, as part of a citywide policy to integrate public schools, Vaughans was bused to predominantly white Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, from fourth grade through part of her freshman year in high school.

"I had to deal with racism," she said.

But heart-to-heart talks with her father helped Vaughans stay focused on her academics, she said. Often, he would tell her, "If it requires you to do 100% to 200% more, you've got to do it to make it in this world."

Following his guidance, Vaughans graduated as valedictorian of Wyandanch Junior Senior High School (now Wyandanch Memorial High School).

After earning her undergraduate degree with honors from C.W. Post College (now LIU Post), and working for IBM as a systems analyst and programmer, she earned a master's degree in clinical and school psychology in 1995 and became a school psychologist for the Huntington school district. She then obtained a certificate in school leadership from Stony Brook University and became an administrator.

Vaughans retired in 2021 as a special education chairperson in Huntington.

Wherever Vaughans' professional pursuits took her, she said her father's long-ago words of wisdom guided her. "He always said, 'You have to have a sense of pride of who you are and do well,'" she said. "That was my job."