

HardisonInk.com

God, family and country are focal points in Black History Month program



Carolyn Cohens (left) and Levy County Chief Deputy Clerk Deanna Whiteside Dobbins prepare to start the event.

Story, Photos and Video By Jeff M. Hardison © Feb. 10, 2017 at 11:27 p.m. All Text, Photos and Videos In *HardisonInk.com* are protected by Federal Copyright Law

BRONSON -- The 16th Annual Black History Program by Carolyn Cohens provided everyone with an opportunity to hear about local history, and there were themes that ran through the program Friday morning (Feb. 10) at the Levy County Courthouse in Bronson.

God, family and country were among those focal points, as were love for all people, having a good work ethic and persevering through any difficulties.

The first two years of the 16-year succession of annual events were a little different than the following years. At first, the event was held in the lobby of the Levy County Courthouse.

Over the years it moved into the Levy County Commission Meeting Room. For the past couple of years, though, a courtroom was required because it has grown to include that many people as participants and observers.

Gospel Sing

In the video, Johnnie Lee Phillips (left) and Leon Marshall inspire every to sing *God Has Smiled on Me*.

[VIDEOS CAN BE SEEN THROUGH LINK ON MAIN FEBRUARY PAGE](#)

While each year the program is similar, it progresses each year, too. And this year, it ended with Deputy Clerk Donna Cicale announcing her plan to retire from the office of Levy County Clerk of the Court Danny Shipp, effective Feb. 23.

HardisonInk.com

Cicale has helped Cohens each year with the program since it began. Cohens presented Cicale with a painting as a gift.



Deputy Clerk Donna Cicale (left) listens as her friend Carolyn Cohens speaks about how they have worked together to make these 16 years of Black History Month events happen. Levy County Clerk Danny Shipp not only has sponsored this each year, but the Black History Month exhibits each February are from the work of Cicale at the direction of Shipp.



Donna Cicale (left) show the audience the painting of a flower that Carolyn Cohens made for her as a gift.

HardisonInk.com

Cohens, an artist and author, again produced a heart-warming program, where relatives, friends and colleagues of the honorees shared their thoughts about these individuals.

Chief Deputy Clerk Deanna Whiteside Dobbins announced at the start of the meeting that County Clerk Danny Shipp was ill, and was unable to attend.

The people who were specifically honored during the program were Gibb Patterson, Alton Freeman, Doris Hunter Jones, James Marshall, Pye Theresa Thomas, Reginald L. Scott, Neal Blake, Millie Richardson, Deborah Singleton and Martha Harris.

There were several people at the event, which filled all of Courtroom A.

Levy County School Board Member Chris Cowart opened the event with prayer. Levy County Supervisor of Elections Tammy Jones provided American flag pins for Cohens to present to veterans and others who were honored.

Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison was in the audience for the whole two hours. Levy County Judge J.T. "Tim" Browning was able to watch a little bit of the program, but he had to return to the bench in Courtroom B.

Levy County Tourist Development Council Director Carol McQueen and an assistant provided cookies and orange-flavored punch as refreshments after the event.

Assisting her mother was Katrina Cohens, who read from the certificates presented to the honorees on behalf of Clerk Shipp.

There was singing near the start of the program and near the end.

Johnnie Lee Phillips sang *Troubles of This World*.

The lyrics of that song show the singer will soon be done with the troubles of this world as the singer is "going home to live with God."

Near the end of the event, Phillips and Leon Marshall led everyone in singing *God Has Smiled On Me*.

All of the individuals expressed their gratitude to Cohens for her efforts to share memories of people and families as part of an effort to preserve history.



Gibb Patterson, 95, accepts an American Flag pin from Carolyn Cohens, courtesy of Levy County Supervisor of Elections Tammy Jones.

HardisonInk.com

Gibb Patterson

Gibb Patterson, 95, of Bronson, spoke about himself and his wife the late Rosena Patterson.

Gibb was born July 18, 1921. He married Rosena when he was 19 years old. She was a housewife and a nurse's aide. She died on July 3, 2005.

The couple had nine children – six daughters and three sons. Mr. Patterson said that he and his wife worked hard to feed and care for their children.

He did not complete school, because he started working at the age of 14.

He worked in the sawmill -- providing pulpwood products. We worked in the turpentine production business as well. He raised hogs, and loved fishing and baseball.

He would wake up early to go to work, because he had to walk to work. Patterson said that he praises the Lord for being able to make that walk, and to complete the work, and to feed his children without having to depend on food stamps.

“They didn't have to go to bed hungry, praise the Lord,” Patterson said. “They were full of whatever.”

The crowd laughed after he said that.

“It's a wonderful thing to care for your family, praise the Lord,” the 95-year-old man said. “And that goes for today, Amen. So, if you have a family – care for them, praise the Lord.”

Another bit of advice he provided to listeners was to be aware that every person is going to pass away. Be prepared at all times to meet the Lord.

Patterson said he has been baptized in the name of Jesus, and he has received the Holy Ghost.

“And we love the Lord, too,” he said. “We want you to know that. Without him, amen, I couldn't make it.”

Patterson served in the United States Army. He received an American flag pin that was put on him by Cohens, after being provided by Supervisor of Elections Jones.

Phyllis Cowart spoke about her family's connection to Patterson. He manicured the Cowart's lawn for about 15 years, she said.

“And a whole lot of days he was there,” she said, “we had a little bit of church.”

Cowart said she is humbled to be able speak on behalf of Patterson, who she knows is a Christian and a godly man. She said her family loves and respects Patterson.

Some of Patterson's nine children spoke during the ceremony. His oldest daughter said she is thankful to God for the parents she and her siblings had.

One daughter said their parents taught them to have a foundation that was first to have a love of God, then a love of family and third, a love of country.

His youngest son was present and said that he is thankful to have had such wonderful parents.

HardisonInk.com



Alton Freeman speaks about his career in law enforcement following his time in the United States Army, including a year in Vietnam.

Alton Freeman

Alton Freeman grew up in the Montbrook and Williston area of Levy County. He shared some of his history with listeners.

He had the opportunity to speak after a few other honorees. Some of them had expressed how parents kept their children in line by explaining clearly that they were the parents.

In his whole neighborhood, his mother assured that none of the children stepped out of line, Freeman said, and it is perhaps from this influence, he added, that no young men from Levy County in that time went to jail.

“They always told us ‘Go to school. Get your education, and do something,’” Freeman said.

He saw his father return home from working on the railroad, and his father would look very beaten down.

“Back in those days,” he said, “It was manual labor. My mother was a field worker, so that we could stay in school.”

Although his parents wanted all of their children to go to college, Freeman joined the United States Army. Back then, he went to Vietnam for a one-year tour.

After leaving the Army, he went to work for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission. He worked in Leon County (Tallahassee). In 1983, after also working several years with the FWC in the Central region of Florida, he joined the Marion County Sheriff’s Office.

He spent a total of 30 years (and two months) in law enforcement.

“We come from different little communities,” Freeman said, “but there is a certain commonality of pride and confidence in what we have done. We live in small towns, small communities, but we went off to do good things.”

He said he felt honored to be invited as a person to share his history with the listeners.



Doris Hunter Jones speaks about her life as a female forester decades ago.

Doris Hunter Jones

Doris Hunter Jones was the first female forest ranger in Levy County.

She said her husband asked her “How do you know you can climb that tower?”

“If I couldn’t climb the tower,” she told her husband, “I wouldn’t have gotten the job. God gave me the job. I know He’s going to give me the ability to climb the tower.”

She said being a forester in the Florida Division of Forestry was a man’s job, and she thought she may have been given the job to prove that point. However, she proved otherwise. She served in that state agency for 14 years.

“I’m proud to say I did my job well,” Jones said, “because when I left, they hired three people to do it.”

While at forestry, she completed coursework at the University of Florida to earn a degree in social work, with a minor in women’s studies. Then while working at Lancaster Correctional Institution, she earned her certification in education.

Jones said she thanks God for what He has given her. She said she is thankful to Cohens for providing the Black History Month program in Levy County.

Most of all, though, Jones said she is thankful for the help given to her by the late Etter Thomas Usher Sr. (1926 - 2015).

Lynetta Griner, one of Usher’s daughters, was present in the audience and Corey Griner, her son and a grandson of Usher, was also present.

“He was a sweetheart,” Jones said, “and he was too rich to care what people said about him. And he didn’t mind sharing his wealth. He didn’t mind sharing his time.”

Etter Usher used to live right across the street from Doris Hunter Jones’ mother and they would play together as children, Jones said.

She has learned how to love people without regard to the color of their skin, and she

HardisonInk.com

thanks God for that too.

As for Forester Jones, she did her job.

She remembered one winter when it was 8 degrees Fahrenheit in Perry and 14 degrees in Chiefland. She needed help to complete her tasks, because she had been hired to do a man's job and she was not about to disappoint any supervisors.

Everything that could freeze was frozen, and she needed a hand.

She called upon her brother – Raiford “Bunk” Hunter. He came and helped her warm things up with a blowtorch. When she got home, the well pump had frozen and she was without water for a few days.

Doris Hunter Jones' children include Chiefland Vice Mayor Chris Jones.



Leon Marshall (right) holds a picture of James Marshall. Standing with him are family members and church family members. Johnnie Lee Phillips and Leon Marshall led the audience in a

couple of gospel songs during the program.

James Marshall

James Marshall was born Nov. 16, 1926 in Plant City. He grew up in Bronson. Cohens said he was a very sweet and Christian man.

Leon Marshall and his daughter, and his church family members, spoke about him.

“We were blessed to have daddy,” Leon Marshall said.

His father wanted to live to be 90 years old. He died one month shy of attaining that age, his son said.

James Marshall went to school in Levy County. He retired from Central Florida Electric Cooperative at the age of 60.

He was co-owner of the Hardee Town Nursery for 29 years, which his son said was “a hobby.” Some of the most beautiful plants a person would want to see were at Hardee Town Nursery, Leon Marshall said.

He was a member of St. Johns Missionary Baptist Church in Chiefland, where he served as a deacon.

Leon Marshall said his father had a great sense of humor. His son remembered his father had suffered a stroke and was at Shands.

At Shands, there was a doctor and a whole room full of student doctors. It was there and then that his James Marshall said to Leon Marshall “Didn't you say you wanted

HardisonInk.com

some gopher?”

He knew that was just a forbidden food, but he just loved to joke.

Pye Theresa Thomas

Pye Theresa Thomas was born in Williston. She attended school in Williston, Chiefland and at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee. She participated in several basketball tournaments. She had four children and was employed with Bett's Big T.

She was a 60-year-member of the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church of Chiefland. There were no family members at the event, but Cohens said her sister worked with Thomas at Bett's Big T.

Carolyn Cohens holds a photo of her brother Reginald Scott.



Reginald L. Scott

Reginald L. Scott is the brother of Carolyn Cohens. He was unable to attend the event, but his sister held up a framed picture and spoke about him.

Scott attended Chiefland High School, where he was the first black drum major. As a teenager, he worked in the watermelon fields for his father Charlie Scott. He joined the United States Navy in 1960. He later became a general

contractor for custom homes and now resides in Orlando.



Neal Blake

Neal Blake's grandson said his grandfather was a good man.

HardisonInk.com

Blake was born Aug. 11, 1908 in the town of Otter Creek. He worked in sawmills in Otter Creek and Bronson. He was a Mason and a member of the St. Phillips Lodge No. 897 in Chiefland.

One of his neighbors Doris Hunter Jones said he would check in on her and her youngest son Chris early every evening for 20 years to make sure they were safe and secure.

After he checked in with them, he reminded her to lock the door and not let anyone in.

He was also one of the last deacons to leave St. James AME Church.



Margie holds a photo of Millie Richardson as Carolyn Cohens (left) looks on.

Millie Richardson

Richardson earned her bachelor's degree from Bethune-Cookman University. Richardson worked for a year in Dixie County as a teacher, and then for another 34 years teaching at schools in Levy County – including in Gulf Hammock and Otter Creek -- until she retired.

When Richardson started as a teacher at Chiefland Elementary School in 1967, she was the first black teacher there, and this is the school where she last taught before retirement.



Deborah Singleton speaks to the audience.

HardisonInk.com

Deborah Singleton

Deborah Singleton has overcome many obstacles. She shared how God is good and provides people with the opportunities to progress and move forward.

Like her mother, Singleton became an unwed high school dropout mother at the age of 16 years old.

She experienced abuse over the next several years, and eventually married a family friend. After being married to him for seven years, he became addicted to crack cocaine and that helped rip apart their family.

With three children in tow, in 1991 she decided to divorce her husband. She moved to a spousal abuse shelter and began striving to become a positive model for her three daughters.

Singleton earned her GED (high school graduation) and then attended Oral Roberts University School of Nursing. She is now in a dual Masters' program through the University of Phoenix, where she will earn a Master's Degree in Health Administration and a Master of Science Degree in Medicine.

Her goal is to become a chief nursing executive.

Her three daughters are progressing in their lives as well, she said. One is in nursing; one is in the United States Navy; and one is a student at the University of Florida.

Pastor Walter Hunt and First Lady Tubbie Hunt

Eddie Jean Williams spoke about Pastor Walter Hunt and his wife Tubbie Hunt.

Pastor Hunt and his wife pastored the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church for 34 years. The Rev. Hunt was a retired railroad worker and his wife had retired after working at the University of Florida.

In speaking about Tubbie Hunt, Williams quoted Proverbs 31:25-31

Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.

She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.

She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.

Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her.

Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.

Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.

Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.

Proverbs 31:25-31 (KJV).

HardisonInk.com

Martha Harris

Martha Harris was born Feb. 8, 1928 and she died on Feb. 8, 2015 at the age of 87. She and her husband had five children, her daughter Soundra Law said. Her husband died in 1958. She raised her children as a single mother, Law said.



(from left) Jessie Miller, Melvin Miller, Soundra Law and Carolyn Cohens stand in front of a painting Cohens made from a high school picture of the late Martha Harris.

As a young child, Law remembers her mother taking the family on summer vacations. Back then, she said, in the early 1960s, they only went to “segregated places.”

However Harris exposed her children to life, Law said. They went to Williston, New Smyrna Beach, and the Jacksonville zoo. They saw sporting events at Bethune Cookman University and Florida A&M University, she said.

She was very active in church, and in the community.

Harris helped people in Williston, Law said, to keep the middle school open after segregation. She was active in the PTA as well.

She worked for 37 years in the Dixie Lily Co., which became Martha White Foods.

“And she raised all of us so that we got an education and became successful,” Law said. “She had the work ethic that – ‘You’ve got to work. You cannot stay at home and expect someone to take care of you.’”

Law said she is thankful to Cohens for including Harris in the groups that were recognized.

Jessie Miller, another of Harris’ daughters, said she was glad to have finished high school in 1972.

“She (Harris) said, ‘You can’t stay here (at home),’” Miller said. “You’ve got to work.”

Miller said the last thing her mother instilled in her before she passed away in 2015 was just to not say anything after a person upset her.

Another important thing Harris instilled in her children was to know Jesus.