Untold Stories OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

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BORN TO THE SUBURBAN LEAGUE

Ed. note: Elvin B. Thompson, son of Ethel Mae Thompson, continues the story of Montevallo's Suburban League. "Suburban League and my mother laid the foundation, insisting on fairness and dignity in our town. My story is about growing up in the shadows of that world—and carrying their mission forward."

I was born to a Suburban League mother.

That shaped me in ways I didn't understand at the time, but I felt it. In the way she weighed every decision. In the way she lowered her voice when speaking of "the meeting." In how serious the room became when neighbors stopped by. I didn't need to know all the details—I could feel the gravity. My mother wasn't one for grand speeches or street protests. She was part of a different kind of resistance. One built in living rooms and church basements, whispered between trusted friends, passed down through steady action.

The Suburban League was never about noise. It was about knowing how to move carefully and still make change. In Montevallo, Alabama—and all across Shelby County—Black families gathered not to be seen, but to see about each other. They shared news, paid dues, and built a quiet network of strength. There were no headlines, but there were victories. And lives quietly reshaped.

Most of the women in my mother's circle worked hard—on their feet and under the radar. They spent their days in the local plants, behind steam in the cafeteria at the University of Montevallo, or scrubbing floors and minding children in white households. Some taught in segregated classrooms. All of them learned to navigate risk with grace. My mother didn't have a title or platform. But she had vision—and conviction. For her, caution wasn't weakness. It was wisdom. It was how you survived while still pressing forward.

She understood what too many forget: you don't need a spotlight to make a difference. You just need to keep showing up. So when she couldn't speak loudly, she raised children who would.

THE LEGACY WE INHERITED

I was part of that next generation.

When my mother, Ethel Mae, said, "It was the children who got us our freedom. The adults had to be cautious—they had too much to lose," she wasn't being poetic. She was naming a hard truth. The children could move in ways the adults could not. So we were sent forward—trained, watched over, and charged to carry the weight.

She taught us how to move with dignity, how to speak with intention, how to read a room before entering it. But most importantly, she gave us a sense of duty—not the kind that draws attention, but the kind that doesn't let you rest while others suffer. We were raised to understand that freedom wasn't inherited. It had to be defended—every generation, every season.

The Suburban League wasn't just a club. It was a covenant. I saw it in Rev. Dwight Dillard's calls to action from the pulpit, in the late-night planning sessions of Rev. Jones and R.B. Burns, in the forward-leaning determination of Leon Harris, who used his standing in the community to move hard conversations into motion. These were not figureheads. They were foot soldiers and bridge builders—committed to doing the slow work of lifting us forward.

Many of the parents in our community had attended Prentice High School, the segregated school for Black students before integration. By the late 1960s, those lines began to blur—but not without cost. My own sister Gloria was one of the first to integrate Montevallo High. In 1969, she became one of the first Black members of the Tri-Hi-Y and FHA clubs. Tri-Hi-Y, the girls' counterpart to the YMCA's Hi-Y, had existed since the 1920s. The "Tri" stood for Body, Mind, and Spirit. These weren't just extracurricular activities—they were spaces of visibility, influence, and access. Her participation wasn't just personal—it was political. It was precedent-setting. And it mattered.

That kind of breakthrough didn't come easy, and it didn't go unnoticed.

It reminded folks why organizing mattered. The barriers Gloria and others encountered didn't just reveal injustice—they called our community to action. Their experiences helped lay the groundwork for what came next: Black families in Montevallo coming together in the early 1970s to form the Suburban League. It wasn't just about being seen—it was about being treated fairly. Fairness in schools. Fairness in local government. Fairness in employment.

Shelby County was majority white, which meant power was too. So our parents organized carefully to ensure our children weren't overlooked in integrated classrooms, and public schools served all of us—not just some.

POLITICS AROUND THE TABLE

In our home, politics wasn't an abstract idea. It was survival. It was woven into dinner conversations, tucked inside Sunday sermons, and passed between generations like scripture.

I remember one evening when a childhood friend was over for supper. He casually said he'd vote the other way. My father set his fork down and told him it was time to go. Not with anger, but with clarity. He explained that for us, politics wasn't a game—it was about harm, survival, and dignity.

That moment stayed with me—not for the drama, but because it showed me that our convictions weren't up for debate.

These weren't just dinner table discussions. They were lessons in clarity. In courage. In how to love your people enough to tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable.

And that's what the Suburban League understood. That change doesn't always start with a shout. Sometimes it begins with a gesture—a steady voice, a shared meal, a front porch conversation that plants the seed of possibility.

By the time the League formally came together, the foundation had long been laid—in the resolve of women like my mother, in my father's quiet defiance, and in the doors Gloria helped open.

What they built didn't draw crowds. But it made room—for fairness, for visibility, for the kind of future they knew we deserved.

And because they made room, we are still standing.

(to be continued)