

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

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THE LASTING LEGACY OF MONTEVALLO'S TEACHERS: REMEMBERING BARBARA AND RUDOLPH BELISLE

Ed. Note: An earlier Untold Story (June 2022) highlighted the grace and courage of Barbara Belisle as she became the first African American teacher at Montevallo High School. Here, her daughters, Sonjia McCary and Cathy Belisle Gaddis, along with son-in-law Ronnie McCary, offer a more intimate view of this "phenomenal woman" as well as their father, Rudolph Belisle. Their memories are drawn from an interview conducted July 19, 2024.

"How did it feel having your mom as your teacher?" Anitka asked to get things started.

Laughter filled the room before Sonjia responded, "Well, I didn't."

"She got lucky," Cathy joked. "Sonjia got lucky." But not Cathy.

"If there was one class I had to pass, it was Mama's," Cathy recalled. "I had to be on my best behavior at all times." Other teachers would report back on her—"Cathy talks too much," or "Cathy did this or that."

On a more serious note, Cathy reflected on the high standards her mother set. With a firm but gentle approach, she prepared students for success. "She expected perfect English in writing and speaking. She wanted everyone to be confident in public speaking." To that end, she made sure her students practiced. "We had to recite poems and speeches in front of the whole class." It was nerve-wracking, but looking back, Cathy understood. "It prepared me for the future. Now I see why it was so important to her."

Cathy shared a story. Just the day before, at the grocery store, she ran into a 1976 graduate who said, "Every time I write or read something, I think of your mom. She made me want to do my best and make sure my writing was clear."

Cathy nodded. "She instilled that in everyone."

Even after retirement, their mama never let up. "Until she died, if a news reporter made a mistake on TV, she'd open her computer and send an email to the station, letting them know they got it wrong."

Anyone who knew Barbara Belisle would recognize this story—she was on a mission when it came to correct English! Anitka wanted to hear about her father, Rudolph Belisle, a respected history teacher at Montevallo's Prentice High School from 1960 to 1969. When desegregation closed the all-Black school, he returned to his hometown of New Orleans, remarried, and built a long career with the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office, retiring in 2012 as Director

of Corrections. Among colleagues, he was known as "Chief Rudy."

Like his wife, Barbara, he commanded respect—though in a different way. Larger than life, he left behind legendary stories, many of them hilarious.

"He made everybody buy moon pies," Sonjia recalled. "Mandatory moon pies," she added.

The story goes that Mr. Belisle used moon pies as part of a fundraiser, allegedly insisting students buy them before entering class. Sonjia says some still refuse to eat them, though Cathy, who was never forced, remains a fan: "I love moon pies, I love them."



Sonjia's husband, Ronnie McCary, was one of Mr. Belisle's students. Over the phone, he filled in the details: "Your Daddy sold a lot of moon pies. Sometimes he made students buy them." They cost about twenty-five cents—not truly mandatory, but "because of who he was, people were kind of afraid of him. So he made them buy those moon pies." They were good, but after a while, students dreaded seeing him with that box in hand.

Asked about the fundraiser's purpose—maybe for the football team?—Ronnie paused. "You know, I never did find out."

Another enduring story involves Mr. Belisle and a stepladder. Sonjia remembers being teased about how he'd climb onto the school roof to catch cheaters. "I had several people tell me that!" Cathy exclaimed. Ronnie recalled one of those times: "We were taking a test, and he came outside, got on a stepladder, and peeped through the window. Somebody saw him and started pointing..."

Ronnie added: "He demanded respect until the day he died. One thing he taught me was to always say 'Good morning' to everybody—it doesn't matter if you know them or not; and to this day that that's exactly what I do." Despite his strictness, students held deep affection for him. "He was a good guy," Ronnie said fondly. "I kind of liked him."

Sources: Interview with Sonjia McCary, Cathy Belisle Gaddis, and Ronnie McCary, July 19, 2024. Information about Rudolph Belisle is taken from obituary in The New Orleans Advocate, May 14-18, 2019. For an enhanced version of this story see themontevallolegacyproject.com. Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims. If you have an untold story you'd like to tell, contact us at montevallolegacy@gmail.com.

Photo of Rudolph Belisle kindly provided by Sonjia McCary.

Prentice High School mascot.
Drawing by Arabella Cortes published
in *Little Franklin's Town*.

