

Narvie J. Harris—A PTA Legend

Presented by Past President Leslie Cushman at Mrs. Harris' Funeral

I don't remember the day or hour I met Mrs. Harris. However I do remember seeing this beautifully dressed perfectly appointed, regal woman. I knew I had to meet this fascinating woman and I soon became one of Narvie J. Harris's most ardent fans.

As a history buff, I was kept spellbound with Narvie's recollections of education and PTA. I never tired of her stories and knew I had an unprecedented opportunity to understand an often overlooked part of history.

Narvie shared with me and many PTA leaders her experiences within our organization. Narvie was a confidant and worked alongside of Selena Sloan Butler, the founder of the Georgia and National Colored Parents and Teachers, and who later was recognized as one of the three founders of the National PTA.

Life during the early PTA years was difficult. Narvie spent countless hours advocating for equal resources, salaries and facilities for African American children. She told me of the times the GCCPT leaders had to ride trains at night to avoid trouble that came from the segregation and racism of the time. When arriving at their destinations they were met oftentimes with a driver, mule and cart to transport them to their meetings.

It was the GCCPT that initiated voter registrations at all of their meetings. Every local, council, and state meeting had voter registration prominently displayed and PTA leaders encouraged everyone to register to vote. This organization accepted and reveled in their responsibility to create a well informed active voter base. Narvie was instrumental in the voter registration success.

As a leader of the Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, Narvie Harris continually demanded that schools have proper ventilation, be well lighted, including the basics attributed to what is considered adequate facilities. Sufficient teaching aids, instructional materials for all students and qualified teachers were continually requested by Narvie. She reminded school systems and politicians that students needed the opportunity to work with machinery and to be familiar with the modes of communication and transportation. Narvie made constant requests for sources of music, art; drama and recreation. Narvie said that students must understand how their immediate problems were related to larger community problems.

Narvie began her **state** PTA leadership in 1954, when she served as the Atlanta District president. She served in this position for nine years before being elected as Secretary and then Vice President, before ascending to her position as President. Like many PTA presidents, Mrs. Harris, was asked to serve on state government education committees. At the request of Georgia Governor, Lester Maddox, Narvie was asked to serve on the Advisory Board for the Governor's Conference on Education. She served on this board for five years. President Carter selected Mrs. Harris as part of the Georgia Partners of America, visiting Brazil. "The purpose" said Mrs. Harris "is to help to build bridges of friendship between Georgians and Brazilians." "We will live in the homes," she said, "to see at close range, how citizens of each country live, work and enjoy every phase of life."

For four years Mrs. Harris brought greetings from the Georgia Colored Congress to the Georgia Congress of Parents and Teachers during their annual convention. Narvie Harris worked with GA PTA presidents Leland Bagwell, Ann Woodward and Leason Hart. In 1967 the Georgia Congress of Parents and Teachers bestowed an Honorary Life Membership on Narvie Harris. The fifty years of parallel Parent-Teacher Association organizations in Georgia was ending. During their separate existence both congresses worked together on issues and projects, often attending the same conferences within and outside of the state. The result of their mutual collaborations naturally led to meetings and discussion of unification.

Atlanta Author, Miss Lillian Smith spoke during The Mid-century White House Conference. Miss Smith made the shortest but most dynamic speech of the conference; "We speak of dropping the Atomic Bomb. Why not substitute by dropping segregation." This short comment was the harbinger of things to come not only for our nation but also for our separate organizations. Mrs. Harris continued to represent the organization and brought greetings to many collaborative agencies. She mailed newsletters to all local, council and district units. Mrs. Harris represented the Georgia Congress at all National functions and meetings.

The Georgia Legislature decided to close the state schools rather than comply with the Supreme Court integration decision. The Georgia Colored Congress, led by Mrs. Harris, wrote letters and sent telegrams to the governor and state legislature to meet the challenge and keep the state schools open.

It was time, with segregation finally ending, for the two great organizations to unite. The National PTA and The National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers had begun talking about unification for years. Both National Congresses submitted the unification plan to the Board of Managers of the NCPT at its meeting in Dallas, Texas on January 28, 1970. It was unanimously approved.

The unification ceremony took place in Atlanta, on June 22, 1970 during the NCPT annual convention. The location of Atlanta was fitting because the two founders of the respective organizations were natives of Georgia. Mrs. Harris who attended the ceremony on that day still remembered clearly how inspirational and moving the unification was. The unification was effective on July 1, 1970.

Part of the National plan called for all of the separate state organizations to unify. This idea was already in the discussion and planning stage by the Georgia Congresses. The Georgia Congress of Colored Parents, needed to officially vote to dissolve their

organization. Mrs. Harris as President of the GCCPTA presided during the annual March meeting in Columbus, Georgia. When the GCCPT voted to merge their congress with the GPTA, the treasury funds of the GCCPT was donated to the United Negro College Fund. The substantial donation would have years of impact for worthy post-secondary candidates. The Georgia Congresses officially merged in 1971.

Narvie was a prolific and gifted writer. Mrs. Harris wrote the history of the GCCPT, and protected and maintained the papers and communications of Mrs. Butler and the early leaders of the organization. I will never forget how Narvie supported and encouraged me while I compiled the history of both our organizations for the 100 year history of GA PTA. I frequently discussed with her about the inclusion of sensitive material, such as the disparity of salaries between Caucasian and African-American teachers and the permissible difference in the number of students assigned to classrooms. There was some thought that we should leave out this type of material. It was Narvie who told me that she was glad that I had put this information in the book. Her support made our publication historically accurate and significant.

Narvie had a wicked sense of humor and never hesitated to inject her wry observances. Listening to her comments regarding how people showed up for meetings talking on cell phones and sucking on water bottles was priceless.

As I spoke with Daryll Harris Griffin I was told other related PTA stories. Daryll told me of the tree that was planted while Narvie was president at C. L. Harper, it still stands today. I thought that we could plant an entire forest in Narvie's honor and still not begin to equal the lives she touched with her advocacy.

Several of the GPTA past presidents knew Narvie longer and better than I did, I was honored to be asked to part of Narvie's life celebration today. I had the privilege of designing and creating the Georgia PTA Archives. Our board of directors voted to name the newly created archives after two women that worked at first separately and then shoulder to shoulder in PTA. They both represented their organizations at the national unification meeting and then completed the state unification process together. On November 5, 2009, GPTA dedicated the archives in Narvie Harris's and Margie Britt's honor. It was my dream to see Narvie's face when the plaque was unveiled bearing her and Margie's name. Georgia PTA honors and salutes the Harris family during their time of loss and sorrow. We will miss you Narvie but we will take your wisdom, humor, dedication and passion with us. Thank you for loving us.