

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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JAMES TOLBERT, BELOVED WBYE RADIO HOST: A DAUGHTER REMEMBERS

"It was who he was. He was WBYE."
-- Angela Denise Nathan

If it's facts you want, they're in the obituary. James Tolbert passed away, age 75, in January 2014. He was a member of The Harvest Place Christian Church, Columbiana, a member of the Deacon's Ministry, a US Army Veteran, a lab technician at Blue Circle Cement Company, Calera.



James 'Brother J. T.' Tolbert

Today he is widely remembered and still beloved as Brother J. T., for forty-two years the voice of the central Alabama Black community at WBYE 1370 AM broadcasting from its Calera studio on Highway 25.

Earlier this year we recorded the remembrances of the oldest of his eight children, Angela Denise Nathan.

He was devoted to the radio station, she recalls. "It was exciting to him to be behind that desk at the radio station. It was just amazing to watch him in his element because the radio station was his element. It was who he was. He was WBYE."

Others testify to his impact. Dennis Mitchell, a former radio host himself, now a musician and choir member at New Hope Baptist Church in Randolph, recalls that Tolbert had a daily morning show with a large and loyal audience of listeners. They were glued to their radios when he was on the air. Cooks and housekeepers who worked at UM used to bring their radios to work so they could listen to the WBYE gospel music show while they went about their jobs.

Joyce Jones remembers listening to him on Saturday mornings from the time she got up, around 9 ("or whenever") through lunchtime. She recalls a mix of music, sermons, Christian education, and Bible lessons, as well as discussion of local political interests. Anitka Stewart Sims remembers a regular call-in hour when people would call in with problems or just feeling blue. He would know exactly the right song to play, his knowledge of gospel music was that extensive. Joyce Brown Lewis, a church pianist for over forty years, remembers him as a great promoter of gospel music and gospel groups. (Some groups performed live on WBYE, crowded into a sound booth.) Lewis admired Tolbert. He was humble and loved what he did. He used radio to touch the lives of people in Shelby but also Bibb, Chilton, and Jefferson counties.

And James Tolbert the father? His daughter remembers him as a "real tall man. Real strong. He believed in his faith." For young Angela he was the source of endless encouragement -- of her mind, spirit, musicality, and individuality. On the radio,

and off, he was "always giving encouraging words." "All you gotta do is take that first step forward and God will take care of the rest." Her first memory of him? This tall, strong man beaming with joy that his four-year-old daughter decided to join the church.

At a time when many frowned on the idea of preaching women, he supported Angela's calling to preach. He was the first person she told, and she did so at the radio station. He looked up from his writing pad and said, "I'm not surprised. I want you to preach what God tell you to preach. . . I want you to be an original of yourself."

He was an adamant advocate for the education of his children. She tells the story of her senior year when she and another friend, both outstanding students and both Black, were barred from Montevallo HS's Honor Society. Tolbert, along with other activist members of the community, including Ethel Mae Thompson, consulted attorneys in Birmingham to see that the girls got the recognition they deserved. Angela laughs. "We weren't concerned about wearing gold ropes around our neck. We wanted our diploma." But Tolbert was insistent: "No, they're not going to keep you off the honor roll." That was the man. He fought for the dignity of all members of his family. If it meant making trouble, so be it.



Dari-Delite during the segregation era. Notice the two whites-only windows on the front. Photo courtesy of Clay Nordan.

His demand for respect was unwavering, even during the Jim Crow days. Angela recalled an incident at the Dari-Delite on Main Street, near where Taco Bell is today, when Black people weren't allowed through the front door. One Sunday he refused to take his family around back. Little Angela was dismayed. She could think of nothing but the hamburger she was counting on. What did it matter what door they went through? "No, never again here at DQ." Why? "Because you deserve to go through the front door." Angela, very much a child, not understanding: "Just give me my burger." His response was totally in character: "No, you all are better than that, and you're going to have to realize that."

Now, these many decades later, Angela deeply appreciates the lesson. Tolbert and other members of his generation "taught us how to respect ourselves." She misses her father. Her whole family does. "But my brothers and sisters and I have a legacy to carry on for the rest of our life."

The James Tolbert story continues next month. Do you have remembrances to share? Contact us at MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com. An expanded version of this story, including a gallery of photos, is at themontevallolegacyproject.com. Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims on behalf of the MLP.