

## Reflecting on Changes by Teresa Buckner

Where the pavement ends on Mt. Olive Road in Mars Hill, there stands a remnant of a bygone era. Peeking out from numerous too-close sapling trees and a few stray vines, the remains of the Long Ridge School are not that different from numerous other simple, boxy schoolhouses that once dotted the hills of Appalachia.

But the Long Ridge School is not like many other community-built one- and two- room school houses throughout the region. The Long Ridge School was one of nearly 5,000 schools for black children throughout the rural South built by the Rosenwald Initiative, a program funded by Julius Rosenwald, the one-time president of Sears, Roebuck and Company.

"Oh, I can't even count how many of us there were that went to school there," Charity Ray said recently. "See, we had students that came up from Hot Springs and Marshall too."

At 72, Charity Ray has been a resident of Mars Hill for most of her life, and she has been an employee of Mars Hill College for 38 years. She began as a secretarial assistant in the president's office in 1970, but soon afterward, found her niche in the school's library.

These days, Charity works at a school that enjoys the largest student minority population of any other college in western North Carolina. In her role as a library assistant, she sees and works with young people every day who have never known the sting of institutionalized segregation.

Many of them helped to elect America's first African-American president, Barack Obama. When President Obama was sworn into office on January 20th, most of those students, whatever their racial or political background, realized that the event was a historic one. But it may be hard for them to honestly fathom how far America has come until they view see the story of segregation through the eyes of someone they know-like Charity.



"It seems almost like it never happened," she says. Matter-of-factly and without rancor, she tells about a time when there were places she could not go and things she could not do. And then, with characteristic optimism, she shakes her head and says, "You just cannot dwell on the hard times."

Like the Rosenwald school, Charity's memories tell a story of a time and a place when Americans were segregated at work, in their communities, at school, by the color of their skin.

"I had white friends that I played with and they didn't understand why we couldn't go to school together," Charity said. "But their parents explained it to them."

Charity's mother was an elementary student when Long Ridge Elementary was built. The school was funded by a local fundraising venture. According to Charity, local parents in the community made clay pots from the clay found near the school and sold the pots to make money toward the school's

construction.



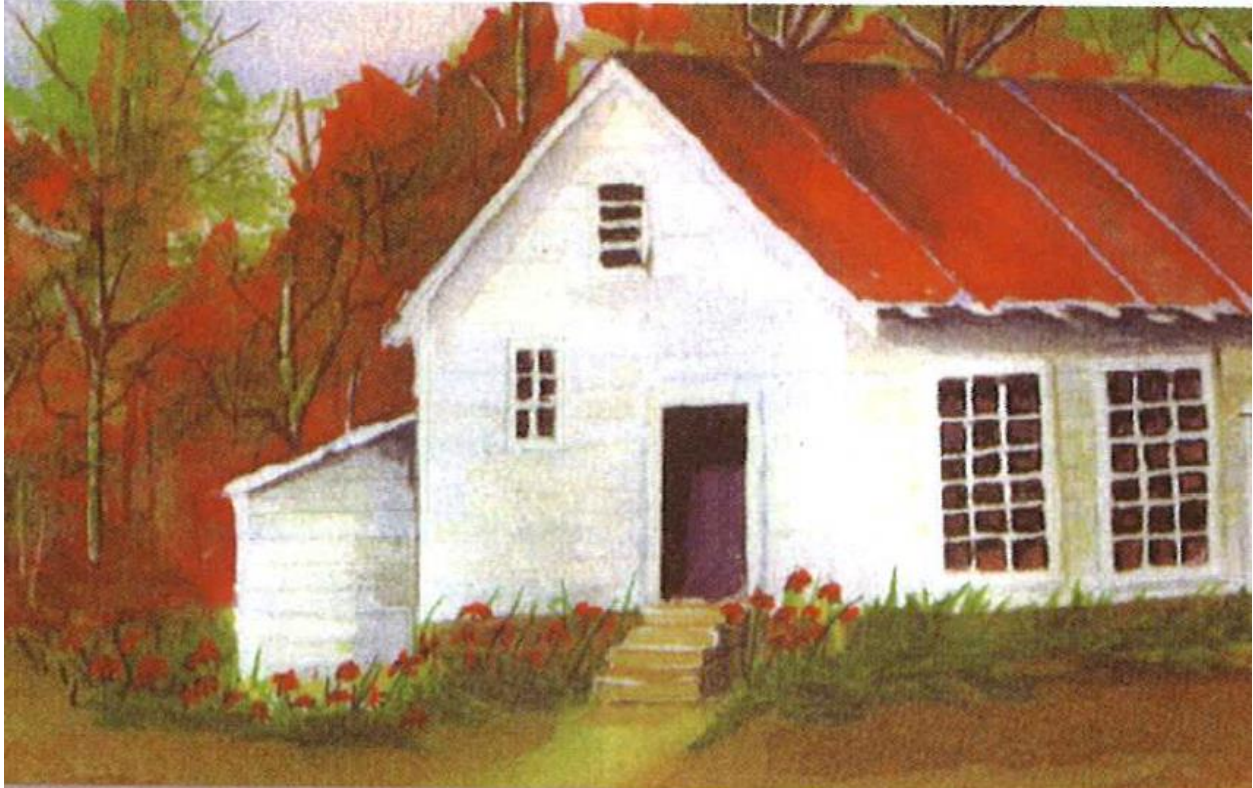
By the time Charity was in school, the Long Ridge School and Mt. Olive Church had become the center of life in Mars Hill's black community. "All the black people in Mars Hill bought land up around Mt. Olive so we could be near the school and the church," she said. Charity's mother did domestic work and her father sharecropped and did farm labor jobs on the side.

"I started school when I was five years old because my mother couldn't get a babysitter and the teacher said, oh that's alright, just let her come on to school and I'll give her something to do," Charity said. "So that's how that happened!"

What Charity did, mostly, in her words, was "doodle." The teacher gave her crayons and she drew picture after picture. It wasn't long before the teacher realized that Charity had a gift for art, and when Easter rolled around, she enlisted her youngest student to draw bunnies to decorate the blackboard.

"It was a gift; it wasn't anything I learned" she said. "I could always just look at something and then draw it." In the years since she discovered that gift, Charity has taken art classes and honed her artistic talent on canvas. She now sells her paintings in various local venues.

Charity attended the Long Ridge School through the 8th grade. At that point, she joined other African-American students from Madison and Yancey counties in riding a public bus to Asheville. "The county paid for our tuition to go to a private school in Asheville because they didn't want integration," she said.



So she caught the bus on Main Street in Mars Hill, and rode to Lexington Avenue in Asheville. She and her sisters then walked about a mile to Allen High School, a private school for black girls near the present-day tunnel on Tunnel Road. At the end of each school day, Charity remembers lugging a heavy load of books back to the bus stop. She and the other black students had to sit, or stand, in the back of the bus, even if there were seats available in the front.

"It did make you mad sometimes, because you were tired and you'd get to the bus and maybe you'd have to stand even if there were empty seats," she said. "You got angry and then that was it, because you didn't dare be rude. My parents wouldn't have stood for that."

After graduation, Charity worked for Dr. Hoyt Blackwell, the president of Mars Hill College, as a housekeeper. But she knew that she didn't want that life forever. So, during a visit to a cousin in New York City, she decided to stay.

Charity worked at a department store in New York for about ten years. It was during this time that she heard about a Baptist preacher from Memphis who was making waves for his moving sermons about racial equality. Not one to be an activist, she never went to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak, even when he was in New York City, but she was impressed with his words.

"I felt like it was going to take time for there to be equality, but I thought the direction he was taking was in line with what Christians would think, that you don't return evil for evil," she said. A woman of deep faith, Charity applies scripture to every area of her life. "You should be bold in your beliefs, especially if they are according to scripture, but violence just never solved anything."

Sometime later, Charity had "a feeling" that she should return home for a visit. While in Mars Hill, her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Soon after his death, Charity's mother got cancer and



eventually passed away as well. Charity stayed with her parents through their illnesses, while months turned into years. She never returned to her job in New York.

Not long after returning to Mars Hill, Charity became the pianist for Mt. Olive Church, a position she's held now for over 30 years. And, in 1970, she took a secretarial position at Mars Hill College.

Charity and a few other people from Mt. Olive Church formed a small singing group, and for several years, they traveled to various churches in Madison County to sing. "In that way, we made so many friends in Madison County," she said.

Charity's brand of "activism" is gentle and loving, and recognizes that even the right words do not always make for equality. "Hatred and prejudice are things that happen in your heart, and it takes a heart change. You can act one way, but you can feel another way," she said.

Not long ago, she was asked if she thought that she and the other Mt. Olive singers had had a positive impact on race relations in Madison County through the years. "I think maybe we did," she says, smiling. "Maybe we did."