

Mary Elizabeth “Betty Brown” Stephens Biography



Mary Elizabeth “Betty” Brown, Class of 1951 - b. 1933, d. From the EHS Yearbook: G.A.A. 1-2-3-4; Student Council 2; Class Council 3-4; A Capella 3-4; Red Cross 3; F.B.L.A. 4

Civic leader, newspaper columnist, and nurse she has been a steady and stylish presence in Chicago and in Elgin, Illinois for more than thirty-five years. From her column, “Steppin Out with Betty Brown” in the Elgin Courier to serving as the first black nurse at Saint Joseph’s Hospital in Joliet, Illinois, Brown has always been a trailblazer.

Born in Chicago, but raised in Schaumburg, Illinois on the estate of her father’s employer, Brown and her two brothers had to learn to play quietly because the employer did not know his chauffeur’s children lived in his coach house. Brown’s mother also worked as the family cook, and after saving enough money, Thermon and Margaret Stephens moved their children to Elgin, Illinois. A multi-talented student of voice and dance, Brown was well known at her church, St. James AME Church, Wing Elementary and Elgin High School, but her mother discouraged her from pursuing singing.

Brown’s mother was a nurse’s aide at Sherman Hospital and Brown decided to apply to the nursing program there, but she was promptly rejected. Disheartened, Brown approached St. Joseph’s Hospital and became the first black nursing student in Joliet, Illinois. Not long after

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graduating, she married her sweetheart, Floyd Brown, who was just beginning to make a name for himself in Chicago radio. Brown served as a wardrobe and makeup consultant to Miss Illinois in the Miss America pageant for four years. She was named one of the One Hundred Women of Destiny selected by Marilyn Miglin & Associates. Brown received numerous awards for her civic work, including HI CHIC Award in Fashion, the Altrusa Outstanding Woman of the Year, Outstanding Woman in Advertising and the YMCA Margaret Henry Award.

Brown and her husband, Floyd Brown, live in Elgin, Illinois. They have two children and several grandchildren. Their son, F. Keith Brown, was the first black judge in the Northwestern Illinois suburbs. Their daughter, Diane Douglas, works in human resources.

Social Justice Award Named for Betty Brown

Betty Brown remembers her first experience at the YWCA Elgin, as a 10-year-old girl taking tap dancing lessons.

It was also where she had her first recital, in front of a large group of parents who came to watch. “I was scared to death,” said Brown, now 83.

Since then, Brown has stood in front of many large groups, as a teacher, a speaker, and a communicator. She became the first black nurse at St. Joseph Hospital in Joliet, founded her own public relations and communication business with her husband, Floyd, and raised two children.

Those early YWCA classes led to a life-long association with the YWCA. Thursday, Brown will be honored at the 32nd Annual Leader Luncheon. The event, held at the Seville in Streamwood, recognizes Elgin-area women for their achievements in education, volunteerism, community service, social services, the arts and racial justice. The Racial Justice Award will be named the Betty Brown Social Justice Award.

The YWCA board has been considering naming the award for a local leader for a few years now, said Julia McClendon, executive director.

There were a few names to pick from, but Brown seemed an obvious choice, McClendon said. “It is amazing, many of the things that she has done, and she is under our own nose. She has had a long history with the YWCA and as a motivator and a leader in the community,” McClendon said.

When Brown started attending classes at the YWCA, the Elgin club would have been one of the few places Brown and her family would have been able to take swimming lessons — because of the color of their skin, McClendon said.

Brown has told her stories of her first years as a nurse, and the response some older residents would have to a black nurse, McClendon said. The comments were not kind.

“But she felt that was one of the reasons that led her to continue to break barriers and challenge herself,” McClendon said.

“As a working professional, Brown has had an exciting and varied career where she served as a public relations manager, wardrobe consultant, and a judge in the Miss America pageant and other pageants across the country,” said the YWCA's announcement.

Brown continues to write as a columnist for the Courier-News.

On Wednesday, Brown said she was up at 5 a.m. to attend the 7:30 a.m. Judson University Prayer Breakfast. While she was a bit tired, she had more to do to get read for the Leader Luncheon. Her husband, son and daughter, and three of her four grandchildren planned to attend.

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Her son, retired Chief Judge of Kane County, Hon. F. Keith Brown, bought a table for the event, Brown noted.

Both of her children, Keith and Diane, took classes at the YWCA when they were growing up, Brown said.

She also taught etiquette and manners classes at the YWCA, YMCA and Judson College. Not too long ago, she said, people have begun calling to see if she'd teach those classes again.

She still lives by the rules of etiquette, Brown said, like waiting to be seated, having her grandson open the car door for her.

She has also seen how things have changed, both in families and in the workplace. Families are less likely to sit down to dinner together to talk about their days, Brown said.

But she has also seen workplaces become more integrated, with women and women of color working “in just about every office you go to,” she said.

There are still challenges, however. “I would like to see more women on bank boards,” Brown said. Recently, at a bank event, she asked a board member where the women were.

“The first thing I said was ‘How many women are on the board?’ ”Brown said. “They changed the subject.”

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