Ethel May Caution: Groundbreaking poet, educator and activist

By MARY SIEMINSKI

Ethel May Caution, a native of Williamsport, was a distinguished poet, a teacher, college dean, YWCA director and social worker. Although she most likely did not know it, she was also the granddaughter of Julia C. Collins, the author of the novel "The Care of Curio," or "The Shrew Bride," published in 1865. She was one of the first black female scholars to graduate from an African American women's college.

Julia C. Collins, who was a schoolteacher and a victim of tuberculosis when her daughter Annie was thirteen years old, Annie's father, Stephen Collins, remarried and moved out of town, and Annie Collins lived with her grandparents, Julia A. and Simon Floyd, on Mill Street.

She was a honor student in the High School, the "colored" school in the town, and found work as a domestic and a seamstress. In 1869, Hand Collins married John Caution, who originally was from Maryland. Annie and John had four children: John, Elva Lockwood, Ethel May and Russell.

Just as Annie's mother died when she was thirteen years old, herself died, from pneumonia, when Ethel May was 3 years old.

Two years later, Ethel's father, John, also died by injuries suffered in a sawmill accident. Annie and John Caution were buried at Wildwood Cemetery in a plot paid for by Stephen Collins.

John Caution's family stepped in to take care of the now orphaned children. John's brother Cornelius and his wife, Elizabeth Jones, adopted Ethel and her sister and brothers to the family.

After only eight months, Emma died of ovarian cancer, and the Caution sisters left the four young children at the Odd Fellows Home. Ethel eventually was adopted by a widow, Mary Davis. John and Belva were taken in by the Overton family, and Russell went to live with his aunt, Louie Caution, in Johnsonstown.

Ethel in Massachusetts

The group mobilized and determined, Ethel did not let the struggles of her early life stand in her way. In 1964, her adoptive mother, Mary Davis, enrolled her in the prestigious Girls Latin School in Boston. Ethel Caution-Davis, as she was called then, was one of the first black students to graduate from the school.

She went to work immediately after receiving her degree from Wellesley, and wherever she traveled, she took her daughter with her.

Among her many jobs were teaching at Eastern High School in Kansas City, secretary of the Colorado National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, and was a casework supervisor in the New York City Department of Welfare.

She also wrote frequent notes about her life for the Wellesley Chronicle, Which she enjoyed, sometimes in verse. For her 50th reunion she wrote a 50 page history of her family, which have been have been in trying to help the family in a quest to reach her way, wherever her happened to be, during the Civil War, was accepted because they would bring me in contact with new people in different parts of this fascinating country.

Continuing to study and write, Ethel spent a summer at the Sorbonne in Paris. She earned a degree from Columbia and a law degree, which is intensively personal; some poems resemble diary entries. Her work appeared in the NAACP magazine Crisis, and in other publications.

In 1963, one of her short stories, "Dreams," was published in the prestigious Classic American Classics, along with works by Harriet Horst, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alice Dunbar Nelson, and others.

Her work appears in anthologies celebrating the African American Renaissance, a period of great literary activity for African America, especially in New York City.

Williamsport roots

Ethel made multiple trips back to Williamsport, her birthplace, determined to learn more about her family's community. She was especially interested in learning about her maternal grandmother, who was Ethel's father's step-grandmother, and never discovered her grandmother's maternal grandmother's fate to be found by her.

After her retirement, Ethel relocated to New Jersey, treasuring her passion for gardening. But in 1971, at age 94, she was still hoping to find her Williamsport roots, especially her grandmother, and wrote a letter to her sister, who had married a Jersey Shore native named Frank, asking for his help and detailing what she knew. She continued to be in contact with her siblings, each outstanding in his or her own chosen profession. Her older brother, Ariel Caution, changed his name to Frank (Pa) Young, widely regarded as the "Dean of African American Entrepreneurs" because of his advocacy for "Negro" sports, for wrote for the Chicago Defender.

Her sister Belva Lockwood, named after one of the first female candidates for U.S. President, studied at the University of Chicago and enjoyed a distinguished career as a nurse in Taunton, New Orleans and Chicago, respectively.

While a student, she witnessed the Million Dollar Store restaurant, and one day she overheard some male diners discussing inappropriate colleges for their daughters. Wellesley College was the "best," they agreed. Then and there she decided to attend Wellesley.

To earn money for tuition, according to a fellow alumna of Girls' Latin. She prepared for admission, a program of memorized poems and speeches that she would deliver as an event at black churches around town and people would pay to hear. She never got an encore.

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Lifestyle

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A Man

By Ethel Caution-Davis

Man was born, the garbed in hues of night, the mystery of feature, crowned with stubborn hair.

First, you and my purview of the God I am, His Mind, His Spirit, His Great Soil all live in me.

Till I shall come into mine own inheritance, for God in black and white is just the same.

Then, shall my servant, me set no bounds.

Man was born, so shall I — A Man.

The Crisis, April 1916

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