

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

- HISTORY

MEET THE VERY
IMPORTANT PEOPLE
FOR WHOM
MCKINNEY
SCHOOLS ARE
NAMED.
TENTH IN A
SERIES
OF ARTICLES.

BY ERICA PHILLIPS



LEONARD EVANS, JR. MIDDLE SCHOOL

It was not Leonard Evans' lot in life to become an educated man.

Born in 1924 and raised in the staunchly-Southern town of McKinney, Texas, he grew up in an age when inferior schooling for minorities was the norm — a shameful social condition that kept generations of black children trapped in a cycle of ignorance and hopelessness. Add to that the fact that poverty only enabled Evans to attend school after the harvest was in (about half the year), and the young boy's chances of getting a quality education were pretty slim.

But Evans was not looking at the deck that was so dauntingly stacked against him, for his eye had been caught, and his attention held rapt, by a different way of life.

As young as age five, Evans remembered making the simple, yet profound, connection that would re-shape his future.

"When I was growing up, it seemed as if everyone who had gone to school — or

had finished school — had better clothes, better houses, better cars...better lives. And when I checked [into their backgrounds], they had always finished high school, and / or college. So, they got the better jobs. I fell in love with education then. They were doing the things that I wanted to do," Evans said.

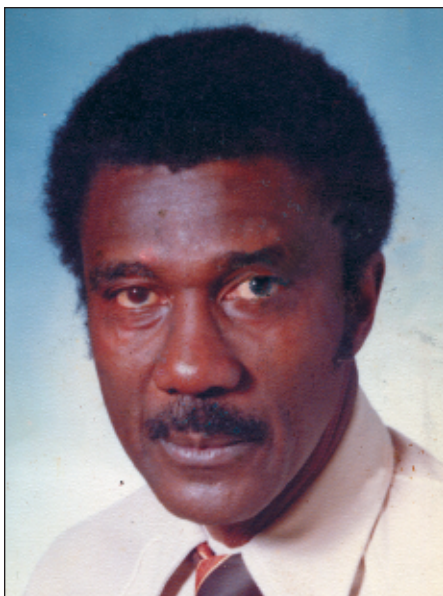
A Depression-era, African American boy growing up in the South, however, needed a great deal more than a love for education to actually get one. While Evans possessed the required intelligence and drive, the conditions of the time necessitated a bit of outside support.

Evans distinctly recalled two individuals who played vital roles in helping him overcome the unfavorable odds laid down by society and personal circumstance.

Because he was only able to attend school for half a year, Evans found himself perpetually behind the other students.

"I had to work doubly hard...I didn't have time to loaf...no time to talk...all of my time was spent trying to catch up. By the end of the school year, I was exhausted, because I was working twice as hard as everyone else," Evans said. Luckily, George McGowen, the principal's grandson and close friend of Evans, diligently coached him in the concepts he missed during the months spent working the cotton fields. McGowen's patient tutelage, combined with Evans' own fervent ambition for a higher quality of life, enabled him to bridge the learning gap between himself and his classmates.

The second "angel" (in Mr. Evans' words) made a timely and crucial appearance when the boy was just 15 years old. After fighting the grueling uphill battle to stay and excel in school, and with only two years left to go in his high school career, Evans was dealt a potentially dream-ending blow. His parents separated and his mother



Across, Evans' namesake, Leonard Evans Jr. Middle School. Photo courtesy of Pogue Construction.

Left, "Coach" Leonard Evans in the '60s. Photo courtesy of Julia Evans.

moved; Evans was left virtually alone, fending for himself for the barest of necessities.

Word of the young boy's relentless pursuit for an education spread around the community, auspiciously reaching the manager of the J.C. Penney's in town...a white man by the name of Mr. Cooper. Cooper immediately sent for Mr. Evans, asking him to come to the store he managed.

When Evans arrived at Penney's that day, Cooper said to him, "Leonard, they tell me that you are trying to finish high school, but that you don't have any clothes, or anything to eat...no place to live."

"Well, yes sir, that's about right," Evans admitted.

"I've got something for you," Cooper replied simply.

And with that, Cooper proceeded to give Evans an assortment of brand new clothes, straight off the rack: shoes, socks, underwear, pants, jackets, shirts — everything he would need to be properly outfitted for school.

When a stunned Evans asked Cooper what he would need to do to repay him, the manager handed him a key to the store, and asked him to come by in the evenings to help the janitorial staff.

So everyday after school, Evans arrived at work and cleaned for Mr. Cooper. Evans expected no further recompense, assuming that he was working just to pay off the clothing debt, "...and proud just for that," Evans smiled.

Nonetheless, on Saturday night of Evans' first work week, when the rest of the staff received their paychecks, Mr. Cooper called Leonard into his office and handed him his week's wages. Evans worked for Cooper for the next two years, and the clothing "debt" was never once mentioned.

"Mr. Cooper was a fine, fine gentleman," Evans stated humbly. "He was my hero."

In the spring of 1942, the boy who could so easily have become yet another casualty of poverty and prejudice made a mockery of his "lot in life" by walking the stage at McKinney High School's commencement exercises. Leonard Evans' achievement was the first step in setting the precedent of educational distinction for later generations of the Evans family.

After completing his service in WWII, he returned home and merely picked up where he left off. As early as his freshman year in high school, Evans felt that teaching was his calling, and henceforth enrolled in Texas College in Tyler. Graduating with a B.S. in mathematics, he took his first teaching jobs at Lincoln High School in Dallas, and following, at Josephine, an all-black junior high in the Farmersville area.

Evans was eventually "called home" when the McKinney ISD hired him to teach math and P.E. at Doty High School. He spent several fulfilling years at Doty, serving students in various capacities (head football coach, teacher and the elementary campus principal), until one day, a phone call came from Superintendent Joe Harper, summoning Evans to his office immediately.

Harper sat Evans down and told him the news. Legislation now mandated that McKinney integrate its schools, and Evans had been tagged as the man to make it happen. He was to report to the (previously) all-white Fanny Finch Elementary School at 8:00 a.m. Monday morning to assume his new teaching post.

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Evans recalled that historic Monday morning with acute clarity. Around 7:45 a.m., driven by his wife, and accompanied by his two young sons, Evans slowly

approached the school. The grounds were teeming with white men milling around the parking lot, awaiting Evans' arrival. "It looked like a carnival," Evans remembered.

Evans' sons, who had seen bigotry's horrors firsthand — cars being turned over...blacks being burned...dogs biting them — pleaded with their father not to get out of the car. Evans attempted to console the young boys, and then, doing his best to mask his own very realistic fears for the sake of his family, calmly asked his wife to drive him to the entrance of the school.

Blessedly, Evans' momentous walk from his car to the front doors of the school proved relatively uneventful. Furthermore, when he stepped across the threshold of the school, the ugliness in the parking lot faded in the face of the welcoming, open-minded spirit of the Fanny Finch faculty.

"The PTO decided, on my entrance that morning, to have something big...there was a big table covered in a white cloth...they had food, they had drink...and all of the teachers were standing in line to greet me...they told me that I was welcome... anything that I needed they would get for me, and that anything that they could do for me they were willing to do. They were an amazing group of people," said Evans.

The first man to integrate schools in the MISD, Evans became a pioneering force for minority educational excellence and racial equality in the district; later generations of McKinney's minority population owe the superior education they received, in large part, to Evans' landmark efforts.

Although he held several different positions during his 34 year career with the district, Leonard Evans was at his best, and his happiest, in the classroom. His teaching philosophy was simple, but effective: "If you show up every day, and you participate every day, you cannot and will not fail this class."

With the innate sense that only children possess, Evans' students intuited his genuine interest in their growth and development, his deep commitment to their success, and his simple love for them as human beings.

Ms. Deborah Moore, a current employee and former student of Evans, recalls what drew students to him.

"Mr. Evans was always, always willing to help his students, and he did so without making you feel at all embarrassed. He had a rare instinct for getting to the source of students' problems...a talent for making you feel important. There is a gentle, yet powerful strength about the man."

On October 10, 2004, Evans' name became a permanent fixture in the MISD, as the city's newest junior high was officially named Leonard Evans Middle School. Civic leaders, school board members, past

students, friends and family proudly attended the ceremony, honoring the man who played such an integral part in the success of their community and the enrichment of their lives.

Retirement in no way assuaged Evans' love of learning or his belief in the power of education, and so, upon leaving the MISD, Evans opened the McKinney Driving School, where he frequently finds himself teaching his past students' children. Evans also works for works for North Texas Job Corps, a federally-funded organization that assists the young people who have fallen through the cracks of the public school system obtain their GED and acquire employment skills. Additionally, Evans continues to serve McKinney's public education system as a 14-year member of the MISD Board of Trustees.

Fellow MISD school board member, Lynn Sperry, feels that Evans' presence brings a comprehensive viewpoint to the Board.

"As a former MISD parent, grandparent, teacher, bus driver, principal and coach, and as a life-long McKinney resident, Mr. Evans brings beneficial insight into the wide-ranging perspectives of the different groups that the school board serves. One of his most valuable assets as a board member is the very well-respected connection he maintains with all facets of the McKinney population."

Mr. Evans is likewise a devout Christian and a proud family man. He and his wife of 56 years, Mrs. Julia Berry Evans, have three children and eight grandchildren, and are members of St. James Methodist Church in McKinney.

The difference in the schooling that Evans' received, and the one that is available to students today, is too expansive to adequately describe. And yet, Evans is able to hone in on the most significant change that he has witnessed during his lengthy involvement in the public education system.

"Back then, there were not too many things that a black man could do, especially in Texas. He could be a preacher, he could be a shoe-shine man...a teacher (in all-black schools)...a barber, or he could he could work in a service station pumping gas and fixing flats. Now, a young black man can do anything. He can be anything that he wants to be...all he has to do is work hard enough for it, and the sky's the limit!"

***About the author:** Erica Phillips is a freelance writer who lives in Dallas.*