

Jersey

62 Years Later, a Question of What Is Right



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Published: November 26, 2006

TRENTON

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THE third grader had asked a teacher a question recently — the kind of deceptively simple question that opens a long and complex story — and now here on this dim, rain-soaked afternoon, like some kind of miracle, came the answer herself, walking down the ocher-tiled halls of the Hedgepeth-Williams School.

“Now what question do you have that perhaps I can answer?” asked Thelma Napoleon-Smith, bending down gently and speaking in the measured cadences of someone who has spent a lifetime working with children.

“Why is the school named Hedgepeth-Williams?” asked Destiny Stoll, her eyes as wide as if her schoolbook had just sprung to life.

“It’s named that because many, many years ago, when I was a child...,” started Dr. Napoleon-Smith, telling the story that she would like everyone to know. It’s about how her mother, Berline Williams, and another mother, Gladys Hedgepeth, helped desegregate the Trenton schools, beginning with this one, Destiny’s own, which was restricted to white students when it opened as Junior High School No. 2 in 1939.

“So my mother and her friend, who was Mrs. Hedgepeth, decided that they would do the right thing,” Dr. Napoleon-Smith continued, explaining to Destiny about the lawsuit the two women filed, and the 1944 court decision that opened the school to her older brother, Leon Williams, and to Janet Hedgepeth, who otherwise would have had to walk more than two miles to the school reserved for black students.

When Thurgood Marshall was seeking precedents in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which he would argue before the [United States Supreme Court](#) a decade later, he wrote to the lawyer who had argued the Trenton case. The school was renamed in 1993 after the two mothers.

“That was my mother’s mantra, ‘Do the right thing, do the right thing,’ ” Dr. Napoleon-Smith had said earlier in the day, before meeting Destiny. “That’s my job now. I want to build on the work that they did.”

Dr. Napoleon-Smith followed her brother to Junior 2 in the mid-1950s and then returned to the Trenton schools as a teacher, principal and administrator, retiring in 1999 after 36 years. Since 2002, she has served on the State Board of Education, but she keeps coming back to her old school, trying to do the right thing, which is sometimes harder to discern now than in her mother’s day. Hedgepeth-Williams, once all white, is now almost entirely African-American and Latino, and no court can desegregate it as swiftly and decisively as one did in 1944.

“Right now, there are too many urban schoolchildren who believe they can’t learn, because they’ve been beaten down so much,” Dr. Napoleon-Smith said. “I think it’s the isolation from each other that feeds that disrespect and anger, because the children realize they’re segregated from other children.”

So one way of doing the right thing is what brought her out this day — the work she does as a consultant with Kidsbridge, a nonprofit organization run by Lynne Azarchi, a white graduate of Junior 2. Before visiting Hedgepeth-Williams, Dr. Napoleon-Smith visited the minimuseum on tolerance that Kidsbridge opened this spring at the College of New Jersey in Ewing. A class from the school was working its way through the interactive exhibits.

“This school is in our hearts,” Ms. Azarchi said. “These kids can really be saved if you spend the time with them.”

Kidsbridge works regularly with about 40 students identified by the school as especially needing what Ms. Azarchi calls “character education.” Last spring, in the school’s cavernous auditorium, they staged a play, written by one of Dr. Napoleon-Smith’s nephews, about the 1944 case. If the funding comes through, they plan to mount another production next year.

Dr. Napoleon-Smith had turned 4 just before the trial, but she can still see what her mother wore. “Oh, she had a pretty dress,” she said. “A black and white print.”

Her father, Booker, didn't go. He couldn't get the day off from Curtis Wire and Cable, where he worked for more than 40 years as a machine operator.

Her brother Leon — who, like all the other plaintiffs, has since died — went on to become a chef and to raise two doctors and a school administrator. Another brother, Ernie, became Trenton's first black police chief.

After returning a star-struck Destiny to class, Dr. Napoleon-Smith headed out into the rain and drove several blocks to Parker Avenue, to a place she hadn't seen in a while — the row house where her parents raised seven children, in a neighborhood that glows in her memory as a model of stability and diversity.





“Wow, my stomach just flipped,” she said when she saw her old home on a sagging block, boarded up, its decline a stark illustration of all the forces — the flight of the middle class, the disappearance of jobs like her father's — that work against the city's schools now and that can't be solved by a judge banging a gavel down on a single decision. “This was such a pretty little row house.”

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