

Sharon Bonner Yates Hometown Hero - 2020



Sharon Dianna Bonner was born September 18, 1949, in Dinwiddie County.

She is the youngest of eight children born to John Moses Bonner and Laura May Jones-Bonner. She grew up with two brothers, John and Lester; and five sisters, Gladys (deceased), Charlene (deceased), Dorothy, Emma and Evelyn, and a dedicated family friend Marne Reese Jones.

Sharon and her siblings came from humble beginnings. When she was young, her parents were sharecroppers and grew tobacco, peanuts and soybeans. Later, Mr. Bonner worked for Brown & Williamson, and Mrs. Bonner worked for Central State Hospital and performed domestic work in the community.

Sharon attended DeWitt Elementary School, a school for African American children; and then progressed to Southside High School. In 1965, when she was in the 10th grade, Sharon was encouraged, along with 99 of her Southside High School students to transfer, and thereby integrate, Dinwiddie High School through the *Freedom of Choice* initiative. This was a difficult choice for Sharon, as she left many friends and teachers that she loved, such as her lifelong friend Marion Jones Ampy.

While a pivotal point in Dinwiddie County's history, this transition was far from glamorous. Sharon and her *Freedom of Choice* peers were ridiculed beyond that to which any human being, especially children, should be subject.

Despite this, Sharon Bonner was determined to excel and became the only African American in the class of 1968 to be inducted into Dinwiddie High School's National Honor Society.

Later that same year, Miss Bonner entered Virginia State University, and married her high school sweetheart, John Yates. Mr. Yates, a mechanic by trade, went on to own his own trucking business and worked as a heavy equipment mechanic and supervisor on Fort Lee. He

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retired from Fort Lee and later from Dinwiddie County Public Schools as a Senior Mechanic in the transportation department.

While in college, Mrs. Yates worked domestically in the community and her first, official, job was as a switchboard operator with C&P Telephone Company. She recalls not liking this job at all because there was just too much going on at once on the board. While in college, Mrs. Yates also worked at Central State Hospital, Three Sisters Dress Shop, Thalheimer's, J.C. Penney's and Brown & Williamson Tobacco. Each of these employment experiences helped prepare her for a career working with diverse groups of students and parents.

It was during her undergraduate years at VSU that Mr. and Mrs. Yates two children were born, Monique and Dominick. Mrs. Yates graduated from VSU with a Bachelor's Degree in English in 1974.

Mrs. Yates says it was Mrs. Evelyn Abrams, her high school English teacher, who inspired her to pursue a degree in English and career in education.

Following graduation from VSU, Mrs. Yates accepted a position teaching English at Dinwiddie County Junior High School. Her principal was Mr. William Morgan. Mrs. Yates returned to VSU and graduated with a Master's Degree in English in 1984.

While teaching at Dinwiddie County Jr. High School, Mrs. Yates taught pre-vocational, remedial, mainstreamed special education, college-bound, and gifted students. Through this work she discovered a true passion for working with students struggling to overcome challenges. She wrote and taught the first alternative program curriculum in Dinwiddie County. Later when Mr. Jimmy Spence became the Alternative Coordinator, he referred to Mrs. Yates as the "Mother of Alternative Education".

Mrs. Yates returned to Virginia State, yet again, and completed more than 30 course hours toward a doctoral degree, through this process, she earned a certification in supervision and administration. After 17 years in the classroom, Mrs. Sharon Bonner Yates accepted the position of Assistant Principal at Dinwiddie High School making her the first female assistant principal at the high school level in Dinwiddie County.

In 1997, Mrs. Yates became the Director of Secondary Instruction and Staff Development for Dinwiddie County Public Schools. She was responsible for the division's alternative program; career and technical education program; adult education program; secondary instruction; and staff development.

As Director of Secondary Education, Mrs. Yates worked as the division's liaison to the John Tyler Community College Partnership to Ensure Educational Reform (PEER) consortium, and worked closely with Dinwiddie County to establish the Dinwiddie County Youth Workforce Development Initiative.

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Throughout her career, Sharon Yates was a mentor to many, many students and teachers. One very special mentee is Dr. Kim Evans, Superintendent of Greenville County Public Schools.

Sharon Yates retired from Dinwiddie County Public Schools in 2016, after 41 years. Retirement has not slowed her down. Mrs. Yates has represented Dinwiddie County on the Appomattox Regional Library System Board of Directors, served on the Dinwiddie County Board of Equalization, and is a current member of the Dinwiddie County Industrial Development Authority.

Mrs. Yates is a member of Mount Level Baptist Church where she serves on the Board of Trustees, is Church Clerk, a member of the Ebony Gospel Choral Ensemble, previously served as Director of Youth and Sunday school teacher for numerous years. She is also Chairman of the Senior Saints Ministry.

Following her call and passion to work with youth, Mrs. Yates founded the PEARLS (Prepared Educated, Acclimated, Resourceful, Ladies of Success). She currently collaborates with Virginia State University's Dr. Rhetta Brown in a partnership to enhance activities and experiences for the PEARLS. Mrs. Yates is a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and active in the Petersburg Alumnae Chapter. She will celebrate 20 years of membership in April 2020.

Mrs. Yates is a member of the Historic Southside High School Alumni Association, which is more than 100 members strong and enjoys 501(c)3 status. This allows the organization to accept charitable donations for use in the community. The Southside High School Alumni Association also maintains a museum in the building, showcasing memorabilia from the Southside High School era.

Sharon Yates is also a member of the Dinwiddie Chapter of the Virginia State University Alumni Association, the Dinwiddie Retired Teachers Association, and the Dinwiddie Kiwanis.

Mrs. Yates has four grandchildren, Shanique, Sommer, Dominick, and Ariyanna; and a God grand-daughter, Lajoyouse. She is blessed with an extended family that includes Velda, Ashley, Jaquan, Kareem, and Hendrick. She also has a plethora of nieces and nephews who refer to her as "Aunt Bug". Mrs. Yates has more honorary grandchildren, nieces and nephews than can be listed tonight. She is also thankful for her sisters-in-laws, Barbara and Rosa Bonner and her son's fiancé, Melissa.

Mrs. Yates feels particularly blessed to spend time with her 100-year-old "Aunt Nanny", Dinwiddie's own, Flossie Jones-Jordan, and her soon-to-be 100-year-old "Aunt Bunchie" who lives in New York City.

She was fortunate to have the best in-laws imaginable. Roger and Nannie Yates were like her second parents. Her sister-in-law Polly, to whom she is especially close, is her partner-in-crime.

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Mrs. Yates considers Deborah a sister and Roger, Walter (deceased), Stanley, James and Danny, as brothers. They were all instrumental in helping raise her children, especially while working and attending school.

She has many wonderful friends, but some are particularly special such as her lifelong friend Marion, along with TheElla, Joyce, Betty, Kate, Velma, and her Southside/Dinwiddie High School friends. She has conference-traveling buddies, Ann and Betty; and Ann is also Mrs. Yates' CIAA basketball winter vacation travelling buddy.

Mrs. Yates credits much of her success as an educator to the many role models who influenced her along the way.

Mrs. Yates feels strongly that her experience as a *Freedom of Choice* student at Dinwiddie High School taught her lessons that she used throughout her career as an educator. She has facilitated several workshops on the importance of being culturally responsive in the classroom, for the National Education Association and National Teachers of English Association. Through these workshops, Mrs. Yates stresses that it is not just about ethnicity – it is important for teachers to have an understanding and appreciation for the socio-economic status of their students.

Mrs. Yates sums her life's work up with one of her favorite verses from the Bible, Luke 12:48 "To whom much is given, much will be required." As in her career, she spends her retirement giving back. She continues to support the youth of Dinwiddie County through youth mentoring, support and program planning, while she also seeks opportunities to support and mentor teachers.

At some point, Mrs. Yates hopes to write a book about her life, and title it "There is strength in the struggle."

Sharon Bonner Yates has dedicated her life to making Dinwiddie County and the world a better place for all of God's children, and it is an honor to recognize her tonight as one of Dinwiddie's 2020 Hometown Heroes.