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LOCAL

Longest-living Rosewood survivor: 'I'm not angry'

With the passing of Mary Hall Daniels, a living link to dark history is broken

Andrew Caplan andrew.caplan@gvillesun.com



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Mary Hall Daniels accepts the Rosa Parks Quiet Courage Award during a ceremony in 2009, at age 90. Daniels was honored for not only surviving the Rosewood Massacre in 1923, but for educating and teaching others about the tragic events. Daniels, 98, was the last known survivor of the Rosewood Massacre but died on May 2 after a battle with lung cancer.

For much of her life, Mary Hall Daniels was a spokesperson for a tragic event she could barely remember.

She was a survivor of one of the more horrific tragedies in Florida against black people.

Daniels was just 3 years old when her family was forced to flee their home by an organized, angry white mob. She escaped the burning town of Rosewood in 1923, clinging to her mother and older sister, through a swamp and by train, just as other black residents did.

As an adult, Daniels gave speeches when asked but didn't really talk about that part of her childhood with those closest to her. Still, the ordeal always stayed with her.

"She treated people how she wanted to be treated," Daniels' grandson Carlous Hall said.

The Rosewood Massacre, in rural Levy County, has become one of the more publicized slaughterings of black people in Florida in the last 100 years, despite the weeklong calamity staying hidden for close to 60 years.

Survivors and relatives have shared stories of that terrifying week in January 1923, where at least six black and two white people were killed, as the small town of Rosewood was set ablaze. Some historians say the death toll could be as high as 27.

Daniels, 98, was the last known survivor of the Rosewood Massacre but died on May 2 after a battle with lung cancer. Family members sat next to her in a Jacksonville hospital as she struggled to breathe that day, retelling some of their fondest memories of the woman who raised them.

"She made the best cornbread, oh my gosh," said her daughter, Alzada Hall Harrell.

"Man, she could make some homemade biscuits," the grandson added. "She could make some cakes, too."

Those who knew her best say Daniels was a woman of pride, someone who continued to mow her own lawn well into her 80s and carried loads of laundry throughout the house. She was an avid Jaguars fan who voiced her disgust with the latest Blake Bortles' interception.

Daniels grew up in Gainesville and attended Lincoln High School in the late 1930s, an all-black school that is now the A. Quinn Jones House, a museum and historic residence.

Blacks back then weren't allowed to ride the bus to school. Harrell, an only child, said her mother and others were often picked on by the white kids because they had to walk to school on cold mornings. But Daniels still taught her daughter to love everyone regardless of their skin color.

Daniels was often the best dressed for Sunday service at First Assembly of God, a Christian church in Hilliard. She moved to a small town northwest of Jacksonville after the Florida Legislature in 1995 awarded her and eight other survivors a share of \$1.5 million in reparations. Daniels had a house built in Hilliard with her money.

Her home had three bedrooms, all chock-full of outfits, shoes and some 100 fancy hats. When it came to clothes, she believed in buying the best of the best, her grandson said.

Hall, 40, said he remembered being young and in desperate need of an Easter outfit, knowing his grandmother could hook him up.

"I'm not getting a cheap pair of shoes; I'm getting a pair of Stacey Adams," he said.

The family says they don't want the history of Rosewood to disappear and say more people should know about it. Had Rosewood residents not escaped, the family is convinced that no one would know about the killings.

"You wouldn't believe that a lot of people don't even know about Rosewood," Harrell said. "I don't think they really teach that, it's not in the textbooks in schools."

In 2009, Daniels was awarded the Rosa Parks Quiet Courage Award for not only surviving the massacre but for educating and teaching others about the Rosewood events.

"I'm not angry," Daniels said during her acceptance speech, adding that God has been good to her.

Hall said he was given a Rosewood Family Scholarship to attend college, a fund set up by the Legislature as part of the reparations bill. He is now a teacher at Hilliard Middle-Senior High School and often reminds his students how grateful the kids are.

“A lot of people had to make a lot of sacrifices for us to get where we’re at,” he said. “We have it good because my grandmother, and other people like her, had to struggle to help make this country make changes.”

The family said they believed Daniels could still hear them talk to her until her death, giving signals of eye flickers and mouth movements. Harrell placed a phone up to her mother’s ear to speak with her other grandson, Reginald Harrell, one last time.

The family said they plan to visit what’s left of Rosewood in the near future.

“I think we owe it to our kids to do that,” Hall said.



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