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Esther Harriott Ottley

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From all available information, Esther Harriott Ottley was the first person of color and the first woman of color to have graduated with a BA in mathematics from Andrews University, class of 1954. This information came to light when Esther's granddaughter, Maya Nelson, a current social work sophomore at Andrews University, mentioned to her statistics teacher, Shandelle Henson, that her grandmother had been a student in the math department during the early 1950s. Maya's conversation with her teacher culminated in this written highlight.

Early Years

Esther was born in Panama, where her Jamaican parents were serving as missionaries and her father helped to build the Panama Canal. When Esther was 3, the Harriott family returned to their home on the island of Jamaica to attend to her paternal grandmother. From then until her early teenage years, Esther was homeschooled by her mother, Euphemia, before going off to Ferncourt High School near their home in Clarendon, St. Ann, Jamaica.

Esther placed second on the island when she passed the Cambridge Overseas Examination at the high school, which qualified her for scholarships and opportunities. The decision was made for her to travel to Mandeville, Jamaica, to pursue teacher education at West Indian Training College (WITC, now Northern Caribbean University-NCU), where in 1926 both of her parents had received college degrees.

Following her graduation from WITC with an associate's degree in math (class of 1948), she taught math at the college for several years before migrating to the United States to attend Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC, now Andrews University). At EMC she recalls being assigned a work/study placement with then math professor William Specht, for whom she worked the rest of her time at EMC. She had great admiration for Specht and continues to credit him with inspiring her to pursue a career in math and physics. Esther's days at EMC were not initially bright, however. She tells the story of getting off the plane, arriving at EMC and finding herself alone in her dorm room with few basic supplies and no emotional support system. Esther remembers hearing the song "You'll Never Walk Alone" and feeling the comforting arms of the Savior enfolding her and giving her the strength to endure work, school and the cold winters of Michigan away from her family in Jamaica. She graduated from EMC in 1954, in a ceremony held at Johnson Gym, and continued on to Columbia University in New York to pursue a master's degree in education.

Family Life

In 1955, Esther married her Trinidadian college sweetheart, Dr. Neville Ottley (EMC class of 1953). They moved to Washington, D.C., to be together while he finished his last two years of medical school at Howard University (class of 1957) and completed his residency in general surgery. During these early years of their marriage, they started a family, and Esther joined the math department at Howard University while completing her doctorate in math/physics education at American University, graduating in 1965.

Esther was promoted and received tenure while teaching courses such as calculus and college algebra in the math department at Howard University until 1975, when she was called to be the founding associate dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the university. She later served several years as the interim dean of the Graduate School at Howard but did not want to be

considered for the permanent position (though asked) due to potential Sabbath conflicts. Her dedication to God's will remained steadfast. Just after her retirement in 1994, Howard University honored her with an endowed graduate scholarship which bears her name: the "Esther Ottley Graduate Scholarship." Many students have subsequently benefitted from this fund.

Dedication to Christian Education

Having learned the benefits of education early in life, Esther has spent a great part of her almost 90 years being a champion of Christian education. Her life has been filled with participation in activities at Adventist schools in the U.S., Jamaica and Trinidad. She has anonymously funded the college education of several worthy students at NCU in Jamaica. Many of these students have gone on to higher education. She has served on the boards of Andrews University, Loma Linda University and local Washington, D.C., area Adventist schools. In 2000, she funded the renovation of the men's chapel at NCU. The resulting lecture theater was named the Solomon Harriott Lecture Theater in honor of her father. As recently as 2017, Esther helped fund the Esther Harriott Ottley Reading Bank at West Indies College Preparatory School in Jamaica. In addition, a scholarship fund was begun at the school that helps cover tuition, fees and books for students in need. This year, she plans to endow the scholarship fund. She will continue to influence many through her contributions and example of Christian leadership.

The Ottley family boasts a strong Andrews University (EMC) legacy demonstrating their belief in Christian education. Both Esther and her husband, Neville Ottley, attended Andrews in the 50s. Their daughter, Dawn Ottley Nelson, graduated from Andrews in 1983. Dawn's husband, LeRoy Barnes, also attended Andrews during the early 80s. Their daughter, Maya Nelson, is a current student, and their son, Avery Barnes, attended in the 2000s. Beyond these, Esther's Christian education commitment can be seen in her son, Dr. Mark Ottley, who attended La Sierra University, and her grandson, Jeremy Ottley, who attended Southern Adventist University.

Throughout her career, Esther has been sought out as a graduation speaker, university administrator, church leader, Women's Day speaker, counselor, organizer, math tutor and supporter. More importantly, she has been a fabulous mother, wife, grandmother, family member and friend. Esther and Neville were respected members of the Washington, D.C. professional and Adventist communities for several decades until Neville's passing in 1994 and Esther's relocation in 2010 to Mount Pleasant, Michigan, to live with her daughter, Dawn Ottley-Nelson-Barnes, a professor at Central Michigan University.

Esther will celebrate her 90th birthday with her family on August 24, 2018. She spends her days contemplating God's love for us as well as His promises. She encourages everyone with whom she comes in contact to remember what is important and to be ready when Jesus comes.



Esther Harriott Ottley