



Thereasea Elder, Public Health Nurse, retired

Mrs. Elder has Charlotte's racial history writ large on her gentle soul. Luckily much of her story is preserved in an easily accessible 31-page interview on file at UNCC. She's even merited her own Wikipedia page.

Growing up in Charlotte, she enrolled at Johnson C. Smith University, going on to nursing school in Durham. She enlisted in the U.S. Cadet Nursing program, an initiative to alleviate the World War II shortage of trained nurses. Following the war, she returned to Charlotte, and worked at Good Samaritan Hospital until she became Mecklenburg County's first African American public health nurse.

The local Health Department tapped her to do a pilot project in Paw Creek, a Klan hot bed. If they thought the experiment might fail, they chose the wrong person. TD, as her friends call her, felt the area needed her so was sure it would work out. In a statement so true to her nature she says, "At the core, people are just people." Despite a rocky and racially charged start, she left with hugs and tokens of appreciation. She remained a public health nurse until her retirement in 1989.

But that's just part of her story. She and her late husband Willie had built a home from the ground up in Rockwell Park. To this day she is that neighborhood's leading advocate beginning with successfully lobbying for water, sewer and paved roads for the community. It is fitting that the park in Rockwell is named in her honor.

Retirement just gave her more time to volunteer whether it's voter drives, the Red Cross, Hospice or addressing teen pregnancy. She's happiest when making a difference, Mrs. Elder says. "I find joy every day in encouraging other people."

Today I find deep joy in telling you her story.