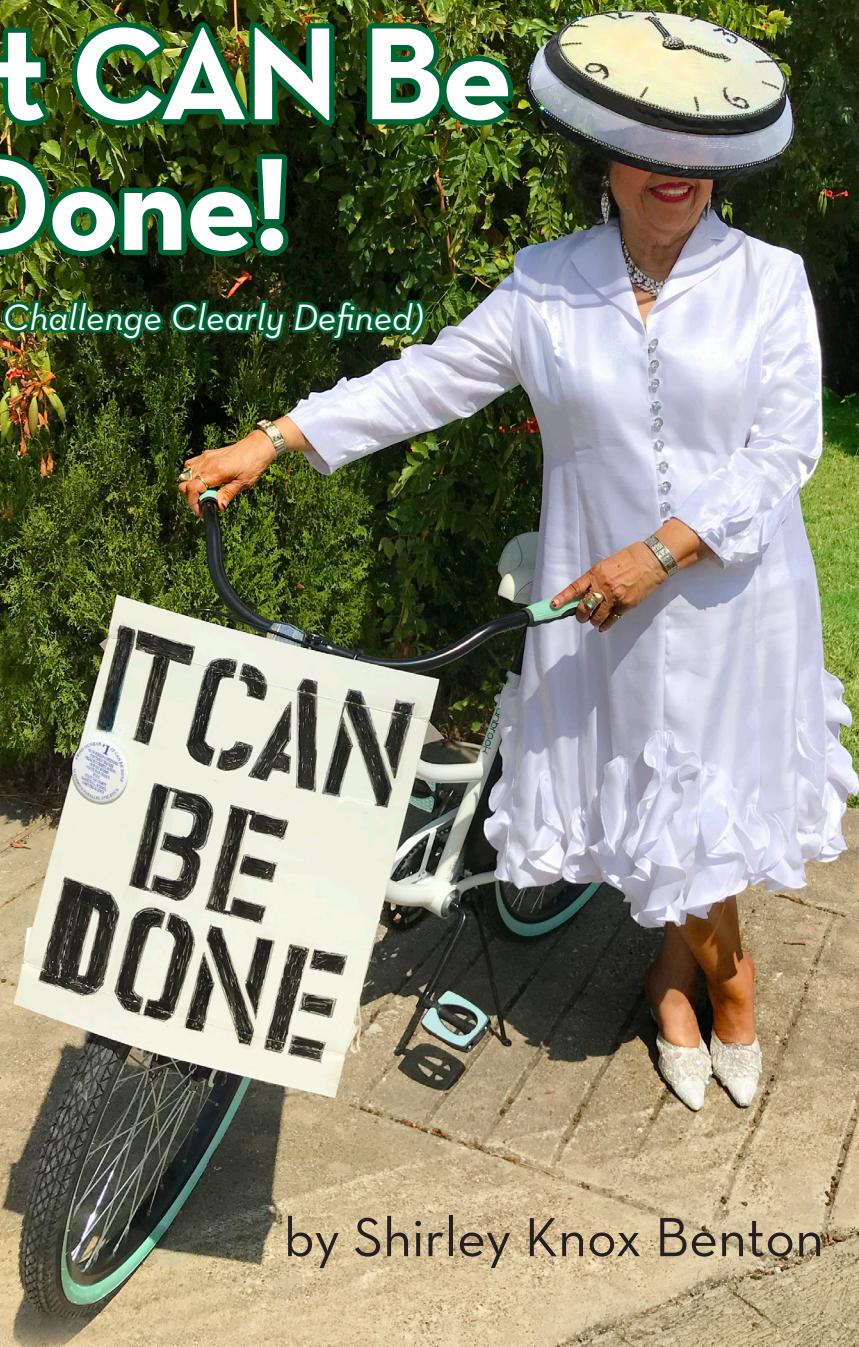


# In Class... With Class... It CAN Be Done!

*(A Challenge Clearly Defined)*



by Shirley Knox Benton

**T**here seems to be a trend in each educational community to put all new principals and administrators 'on trial.' However, the Dunbar School community met its match in the appointment of Shirley Knox Benton in 1992. Her zeal and administrative program transformed this school, that had reverted to gang violence, poor academic standards and low teacher morale into the current model of Academic Excellence. During her administration, Shirley Knox Benton made academic achievements her high priority with a motto of "It Can Be Done." Under her dynamic leadership and instructional capabilities, Dunbar High School was selected by the Texas Education Agency as a Gold Performance Campus and received \$117,550.00 for raising TAAS TEST scores.

– Reby Cary

Former teacher at Dunbar High School, Tarrant County College and the University of Texas at Arlington, Associate Dean of Student Affairs. Former FWISD Board member and State Representative of District 95, and author of six books.



*Time was running out! What time was it?*



It was 4 o'clock in the afternoon of June 22, 1992.

The “central office” administrative team was still toiling with the decision to recommend to the local school board, the first female, Shirley Knox Benton to become principal of a “troubled” inner city high school.

After her appointment, she rode the bicycle through the halls as she observed teachers and students in the classroom. The school had an enormous amount of malfeasance which included, low teacher morale, low school climate, disregard for authority and “gang” activity. This award winning principal did not stop riding until the school was recognized as a Gold Performance Campus.

Her mantra for this inspiring true story, became  
**“It Can Be Done.”**

## *Dedication*

Specifically To: The Knoxes (“AIG – All I’ve Got”)

Reginald (son)

LaVonda (daughter-in-love-not in-law)

The other Reginald (grandson)

My “Lacy Love” Adrianna (granddaughter)



*My son Reginald*

## *Especially To:*

Relatives, friends, co-workers and more than 15,000 boys and girls whose lives I touched over a period of forty-five years in public school education. Additionally, five years as a PSP-Professional Service Provider, Consultant, Monitor and Conservator for the great State of Texas!

## *In Memory Of*

My biological parents, the late Mr. & Mrs. Napoleon (1900-1945)  
Rhoberdia (1901-1946) Byrdsong

– and –

My adopted parents, the late Mr. & Mrs. Isaiah (1894-1961)  
(Lacy) McCalister (1895-1994)

My husband, the late Mr. Sammie Louis Benton (1929-2008)



# In Class... With Class... It Can Be Done!

(A Challenge Clearly Defined)

*by Shirley Knox Benton*



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DISCLAIMER Although this is a true story, most names and locations have been changed for privacy.

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## FOREWORD

### *“Save the Children”*

The sound of that phrase often brings images of devastation and improperly cared for children in third world countries. Actually, one of the promotions embraced by this venerable organization is entitled, 1 Goal, and seeks “Education for all.” That objective resonated with Shirley Knox Benton as she accepted the challenge of academic leader for this inner city high school in 1992. At this juncture, too many entering freshmen students were not participants in a four-year education culminating in a diploma; they were, in fact, not the beneficiaries of education for all.

This high school, was unique and revered when it opened in 1967. Its architectural majesty stood on the southern perimeter of the Hill Heights housing addition, yet enrollment included the entire area and neighborhoods beyond. This school encompassed the soul, not only of the Tiger Booster Club but also the Black community at large. Admirably, to maintain legacy, the booster club petitioned against a major name change when the new school was built and transferred from its former location on Bonnie Street as a junior-senior high school. The parents who sent their students to this campus were hard-working individuals – some were professionals who owned businesses; many were teachers; a large number of them were hourly employees who maintained long shifts-but all of these parents desired and expected achievement from their children.

Teachers and staff genuinely cared about the whole child. Whether they were engaged in the rigorous math class of Betty Gregg, the science lab of Joseph Devine, the dramatics of Agnes Mae speech class, or Jake Bridges’ jazz band, young people had countless opportunities for academic and extra-curricular success. The cheerleader sponsor and industrial arts teacher were as intent on providing wholesome life lessons for their



charges as the English and history instructors. The high school students were graduating in great numbers, matriculating at some of the most recognized colleges in the nation, (Prairie View A&M, Texas Southern University, Howard University, Smith College...), and becoming contributing members of society. Like many residents, city wide, Shirley Knox Benton participated in the school's pride.

What happened to this idyllic scenario? The nearly three decades from 1967 to 1992 erupted with educational and societal changes; many of them negatively impacted this once exemplary school.

Integration happened. In 1971, dedicated, tenured black teachers were replaced by inexperienced white teachers; they were chosen to meet racial quotas of the school district desegregation plans. Although this school was designated a magnet school and recruited exemplary teachers and qualified students for a science and engineering program, a miniscule number of "home school" students were a part of the effort, and as such, a "school within a school,"-separate and unrepresentative-was created.

In the seventies, the district faced an implosion of illegal drug traffickers and "gang-bangers," who ravaged high schools in the city; this high school was not exempt; it happened there, too. Once the 1983 education report, "A Nation at Risk," was published, it declared that American schools were failing to prepare students in a competitive, global workforce, and district school leaders acknowledged declines in student attendance and achievement at the high school.

Additionally, test scores became dominant. Texas laws created generations of high school exams-from TAKS to TAAS-and required students to earn passing scores before they could graduate. Regrettably, an inordinate number of minority students failed these state-mandated exit tests, especially the mathematics component. What happened was a new tumultuous

reality: a high school significantly in need of educational revival and reform.

By 1992, the school's basketball athletes had, for years, forged a reputation as the team to beat in town, garnering district-wide recognition and honor when they captured regional and state championships. Yet, the school had lost significant ground in academic prowess. When Shirley Knox Benton received the keys to the building as principal, she discovered that more than the physical, metal keys to so many doors and closets, she would need to "blacksmith" other keys-these to minds and hearts-in order to "save the children," sometimes from themselves. She soon discovered the type of systemic, academic underachievement being described in "A Nation at Risk" and witnessed the eroding effects of a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatened the future" of these young people.

Undeterred, Mrs. Benton was actually geared up because she had sought this assignment, including its many obstacles: This was her first appointment as a principal. She lived in the neighborhood, while in some respects a plus, in others, a negative. She would become the first African-American, female leader of this former high school of dynasty. Still, there was abundant resistance to her challenges for excellence in the classroom. But Shirley Knox Benton believed change and success could be delivered.

Her mantra for the journey became, "**It Can Be Done.**"

Joan Derrough Vinson

High School English Teacher -1996-1971

# Preface

Please note, and before you read any further, this is not a how-to book. It is simply a book of my convictions, beliefs, ideas and my vision about education. The purpose is to educate, motivate, and inspire young people to understand what they can do with their lives by having a “can-do” attitude. If a little orphan girl can succeed with limited opportunities, one should consider the advantages that are at his or her fingertips. Success can be yours if you want it; first, you must learn to believe in yourself and move forward.

Being a high school principal is one of the toughest, if not the toughest positions a person can hold in the educational arena. No matter how you slice the cake, the high school principal is the sergeant on the battlefield. You’re on the frontline at all times. Everybody is not called to serve in this capacity. It is most definitely a calling or a mission. You must be able to “walk-the-walk” and “talk-the-talk.”

In other words, as the late former President, Mr. Harry S. Truman stated, “If you can’t stand the heat, then get out of the kitchen.” You must be tough, strong, dedicated, courageous, and honest most of all. There are many more adjectives that could describe what you must be in order to become an excellent principal. You must have a back like an alligator, strong shoulders as an acrobat, and hands like an octopus. Further, you must have the brainpower, will power and knowledge in order to keep your sanity in order to remain positive at all times. Being a principal is not a “glory” position. Former President, Mr. Abraham Lincoln stated, “Whatever you are, be a good one.”

The “naysayers” were meeting, pointing fingers, stating, “A “woman” couldn’t do the job.” They didn’t know that I had been through the fire long before my arrival to this campus. It is interesting to note that everyone knew that this campus



needed a “facelift”, but few were up to the tasks. Still others were afraid to speak up; there were others who stood by with a “wait and see” attitude. Others predicted failure just because the assignment had been given to a “woman.” To this day, with all of the successes the campus received with this “woman”, there are still some who never relented and continued to keep a bad taste in their mouths.

Would you believe that once the campus made a 360 degree “turn around” this same “woman”, as they always referenced me, was accused of being in the position for herself? Although she was working on increasing test scores, investigating the allegations of theft, corruption, and improving the poor school climate, this “woman” was doing a good job!

Personally, I don’t know how a “woman” who was working fourteen hours a day, six days a week, often neglecting family, home and friends, could have time to be into “herself.”

Thank goodness, there were those who knew of the sincerity, concern, hard work, drive, compassion and tenacity of this “woman.” They saw the big picture and they were willing to assist her in forging ahead.

She believed she could, so she did!

## **RESULTS:**

This award winning principal holds a number of “Firsts”, namely:

*First female principal*; during which, the school received \$117,550.00 for raising TAAS Test Scores in 1994. This was the largest amount ever to be given to a high school in the State of Texas. 1994 – Mrs. Benton received the Governor’s Award.

*First African-American female* to hold the title of Region High School Principal of the Year -2001 (The title still stands).

*First African-American female* to hold the title of Texas’ High School Principal of the Year-2001 (The title still stands).

*First and only educator in the North Texas Area to receive the Reader's Digest American Hero in Education Award in 1996 for turning a "troubled school" around.*

*First to receive the United States Congressional Award from United States Representatives John Lewis and Martin Frost, 1996*

*#1 Woman in the Workplace – 1995, from the City of Commission on the Status of Women:*



## *My Leadership Legacy*

*Personal Philosophy and Career Path* – I believe in accepting a person as I meet them on a scale of 1-10, with "10" being the top number. I don't believe in trusting another person's opinion; I refuse to draw conclusions. That worked well for me as a classroom teacher for 20.5 years; academic and guidance counselors for 6.5 years, assistant principal 6 years; high school principal for 12 years, an administrative assistant on the junior college level for four years. After retirement: five years, as a PSP-Professional Service Provider for the State of Texas. Each engaged my heart, mind and spirit, fueling my drive to do

whatever it took to make a difference in the lives of children of all ages. I realized early in life, that we, as human beings are unique and different; you can do anything that you set your heart and mind to. **“It can be done!”**



**For Immediate Release -- April 16, 1996  
Contact Sandra Minatra at 1-800-937-2056**

**Dunbar Visit --** Cong. Martin Frost (left) recently visited Dunbar High School to meet with more than 500 students to discuss college financial aid and to join in honoring Principal Shirley Knox Benton (2nd from left) who was recently named 1996 Reader's Digest American Hero in Education. Joining in the visit were State Sen. Mike Moncrief, U.S. Rep. John Lewis, State Rep. Glenn Lewis and Roy Brooks, precinct administrator for Tarrant Co. Commissioner Dionne Bagsby. Chosen from 650 applicants nationwide, Principal Benton will receive a cash award of \$10,000 for the school and \$5,000 for herself.

-30-

*Key Mentor and Lessons Learned* – Fortunately for me, my adopted mother was a teacher who influenced me to become an educator. She made sure that my biological mother's wish for me to be an educator was fulfilled. She taught me survival skills long before I knew what they were. To Read! Read! Study! Study! She



set the bar high in all areas of my life and provided an incredible creative and powerful experience focused on improving life. She “shoved” me to take risks and reach outside the box while holding a safety net below. Finally, she showed me how to manage an effective system with great dignity, pride, respect and class. My adopted mother was the most unforgettable person I know and the best teacher, ever!

*Footprints – Pearls of Wisdom*

*Forego your ego: It's not about you...* it's about the children you serve. For the “u” is bigger than self. This may also help you absorb negative experiences less personally.

*Feast on your learning:* Have gourmet omnivore, gobbling up ideas, research and strategies. Search, explore and make connections with professionals throughout your profession and the world.

*Facilitate and support others:* Nurture and build on their strengths and celebrate their successes.

*Fuse a community:* A community represents far more than an organization...it is a family built on the bedrock of respect for creative contributions of everyone. If you are out front leading and few are following, the problem is with you, not the people. It's time to retool.

*Find fun:* High performing systems and their leaders strive on the energy provided by making the job fun! The leader creates the environment in which fun can flourish!

*Faithful Forever:* Be true to yourself – Trust God only! And keep the faith!

## Chapter I

# Gifts From My Ancestors: Legacies Of My Early Life

The quote by John DePrey “Apples don’t fall far from the tree” is a true statement for me. In order for you to understand how I inherited my drive, tenacity, and desire to succeed and serve as an advocate for children, you must understand my humble beginnings. There was no time for me to become a failure.

Here’s my story...

“Once upon a time, there was a little girl who within eight years of her life lost both parents, seven months apart. Her life changed drastically overnight and forever. This little girl, along with three older siblings was blessed, that, before her parents’ death – her life had been planned for her.

This little girl was adopted by her mothers’ sister and husband; they were strict, religious, civic-minded and stressed finer manhood and finer womanhood. Both had a great interest and concern for education. Early on in life there was a pattern and mind-set that getting an education would be the key to opening many doors to the future.

This little girl was taught if one does her very best, study hard, dream tangible dreams, surround one’s self with good people, set goals, as a result, no struggles would be too hard. First, try hard, believe, persevere, never say “can’t”, but say “can”, and always believe that **“It can be done.”**

If you know within your heart and mind that you’ve done your very best, **“It can be done!”**

Can you imagine a couple in their early fifties, accepting the responsibility of shaping and molding four orphans into good citizens and educators? If you have not guessed, yes, I am the

8 year old little girl. I always feel the need to share my humble beginnings..."from whence I've come," so to speak.

Why?

Because it gives me a true sense of loyalty in the intervening "goodness of an omnipotent" power."

They instilled, cultivated and encouraged the following:  
dreams\*plans\*goals\*good study habits\*common  
sense\*pride\*poise\*personality\*church\*Bible  
Study\*meditation\*eager to learn\*faith\*grace\*mercy\*read\*pra  
y\*earnest\*honesty\*obedience\*self-control\*patience\*kindness  
\*goodness\*good attitude\*can-do attitude\*independence\*self-  
respect\*good self-esteem\*total involvement\*good citizen\*voter  
registration\*good etiquette\*A Child of God!

Mr. and Mrs. Isaiah (Lacy) McCalister were unable to produce



children. It is ironic that my parents, Mr. & Mrs. Napoleon (Rhoberdia) Byrdsong had given them permission to keep my brother, age four, after I was born. However, in July 1946, after the death of my mother, the shocking and surprising news was the talk of the community in this small Texas town that "Isaiah and Lacy had taken in three more children." Some people told them "they were crazy," others looked on in disbelief, still others remained silent, waiting to see what would happen.

These three, Valetta, 18, Velda, 14 and Shirley 8, were reunited with Napoleon Jr. age 12, in making the family complete. Our oldest sister, age 19, had married. It is my understanding that our mother wanted her sister and husband to keep all of the children together. Auntie "Mom" as I fondly called her, did not exchange words. She told her husband,

Isaiah, just like she told everybody, “We have a job to do.” They accepted the responsibility graciously of caring for us.

Through the years, we toiled together like any other family. At mealtime, family values, commitment and togetherness were stressed; this set the tone for bonding as a family. Self-esteem and academics were top priority. The evening meal was served family style; we met and then discussed the concerns and interest of the day’s events. All of us had specific chores and we received our assignment at the dinner table.

Auntie “Mom”, one of twelve children, six boys and six girls, was a college graduate and daughter of a Baptist preacher, farmer and teacher. Her father, my maternal grandfather, was a visionary. After the birth of each child, he purchased 200 acres of land, which provided gas wells, timber and oil. Overall, he purchased and owned more than 2400 acres on the Goodwin Estate. All of the grandchildren were born on the estate. Of the forty-one grandchildren, I am the youngest.

My adopted father, Uncle Isaiah, was a farmer and mechanic with only a second grade education. He could refurbish some of the most interesting parts of cars and trucks that were beyond repair. Recently, I found a copy of his Honorable Discharge from the United States Army, July 24, 1919. He signed an X by his name, which was written by another party and received a bonus of \$98.00 after being discharged. I feel deeply honored to have the document of 100 years, in my possession. Auntie “Mom” taught school for one year before marriage in 1922. The rule in those days, if one married, one must relinquish the position to a single person. Auntie “Mom” did not let that stop her; she became totally involved in her church, school and community. Prior to our arrival, she and Uncle Isaiah had worked together, pooling their resources, bought property and paid for their home in 1944.

In later years, she was hired by the City to establish a library in a segregated society. An avid reader of books, magazines and newspapers, she made sure that, that was a daily routine for me

as well. When she visited the white library to select the out of date books, I had the opportunity to go with her. When people would not visit the library, she delivered books to their homes in order to get them interested in checking out books to secure her job.

I never heard my adopted parents complain about anybody owing them anything. I observed how hard they worked in order to get what they wanted out of life. We were trained with the same ideas; they were a spiritual light in our lives. They talked to us about God and all of the “positives” in life. They did not dwell on the “negatives” of a segregated society in which we lived. Profanity, racial slurs, prejudice were not a part of our conversations. During this time period, Blacks had to ride on the back of the bus, enter back doors of some facilities, drink out of separate water fountains and were unable to try on clothes in the store. I am sure that is why Auntie “Mom” made all of our clothes. Oh, she made pretty dresses with all the accessories. Even as a little girl, I wore hats and gloves to church. It was a way of life and we made the best of it. Lay-away was the common trend of the time for shoes and other items that could not be purchased.

We had Sunday clothes and shoes – school clothes and shoes.

We were involved in church from Sunday to Sunday. Because of Auntie “Mom’s” involvement, we, too, were involved! When Napoleon and I became of age, he served as superintendent of the Sunday school, and I served as the pianist. We were trained to use our talents for God; therefore all auxiliaries of the church were ‘hands on’. At any activity you could always count on three members being present: Auntie “Mom”, brother and Shirley. Once, Uncle Isaiah jokingly stated, “ If he knew Auntie “Mom” was going to stay at the church all of the time, he would have built their house across the street.” She never sent us to church; she went with us and worked with us in all our endeavors. She taught me how to live by the grace of God when all else failed. Daily



prayer, meditation and Bible Study were an integral part of my life. It still is!

Some people called her “Miss Lacy”, our friends called her “Aunt Lacy”; but she was referred to, by relatives and church members as “Auntie”. Specifically, she told me to call her “Auntie Mom”, because she didn’t want me to forget my mother. She was a rose by any name, with a tongue as sharp as a thorn. She had a unique way of working with people of all walks of life, without fanfare. No one was a stranger. In her appearance, she distinguished herself. She was outspoken and would tell an individual what she wanted them to know “face to face,” whether they liked it or not. She did not talk behind your back; you heard it first, from her. She was caring and compassionate. She was strong willed with a dominant personality. Often, I chuckle to myself, “I have the same traits.” Remember, “apples don’t fall from the tree.”

Uncle Isiah often stated, “I am the boss of my house and I have the last word.” Brother and I would ask, “What is the last word uncle?” His reply, “Yes ‘Mam’.” That was always a big laugh, because we knew better. He did too! Uncle Isiah was a great man! We knew not to ask his permission to do any thing; all he would say, “ask Lacy.”

Auntie “Mom” was civic minded, totally committed to whatever she was involved. She would tell brother and I, “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.” As a result, there was something to do at her house all of the time. As I reflect on those days, I think that is why I am a “multi-task” oriented person. We were involved in Girl and Boy Scouts, 4-H Club, Fraternal Lodge and I took piano lessons. If she organized a Woman’s Club, a group of young people was organized to complement our group of friends. We were taught social skills, communication skills, Robert’s Rule of Order, Emily Post, and all of the steps that included “Miss Manners.” She would insist that you keep your shoulders straight, hold your head up, don’t look down and always have pride about

yourself. Be a lady, pretty is, as pretty does. Pretty was not a part of our vocabulary. She did not dwell on “beauty” on the outside; she wanted to make sure that I had something between my ears. For years, I thought I was an “ugly duckling.” Thank God, for her logic. It kept me grounded.

Oh Auntie “Mom” had a shrewd way of doing things to keep us occupied without our knowledge. Case in point: If we asked to “go play with our friends,” her reply, “The garage needs cleaning.” We didn’t learn until we were adults, that, when we were away from home, she would rearrange things in the garage in order to keep it cluttered until time for the next cleaning. However, we learned not to ask to “go play;” we knew what the answer would be. To tell the truth, we really had fun supposedly, cleaning the garage. Brother and I learned to dance to the music on the Sears & Roebuck & Company battery radio. We would turn the music down low, “jitterbug” and “swing” until we were tired. At a distance, we could see her coming, turn the radio off and get busy cleaning. In fact, we were the best dance partners among our peers. When we were on the dance floor, everybody stepped aside.

All of the parents and guardians knew each other. Whenever we attended an affair or church event, Auntie “Mom” was the designated chaperone. That was a decision that was understood by the young as well as the mature. If discipline was needed, it was done with no questions asked. Everybody knew to obey; if not, that was the end of being a part of the activities. Auntie “Mom” stood firm in her decisions and everyone trusted her judgment.

Our neighbors, “house sitters or “porch sitters” were surrogate family members. All Auntie “Mom” would say when we were left home alone, “No company while I am away.” We lived in a “fish bowl.” Was she over-protective? Yes! It was imbedded in us to walk the straight and narrow. “It takes a whole village to raise a child” was a true statement during my generation. There were

no cell phones, but Auntie “Mom” had friends, church members, including several teachers who attended our church who monitored us when she was not in view. Home or school, there was no escape; I can imagine how presidential family members feel having tight security. We were “Miss Lacy’s” children!!!

As I reflect, I can understand now; Auntie “Mom” was determined that our late parents’ dreams and wishes would be fulfilled under her watch. Remember, people told them “they were crazy and we would never amount to anything.” She and Uncle Isiah wanted to make sure that we would do things in order according to the standards of society, namely: graduate high school, college, debutante, marriage and children.

A lot of my classmates, schoolmates, and friends did not realize until years later that, my brother and I were adopted. The eighteen year old and fourteen year old stayed with us for a short period of time, but we remained close. A lot of people did not realize until years later that we had older siblings.

We stayed in touch with cousins and relatives who continued to live on my maternal grandfather’s estate. During the summer months we would visit when they had “homecoming church revivals.” It was like a family reunion. People would return home from miles and out of state. They would prepare and serve hearty meals of chicken and dressing, ham, potato salad, greens, peas, cornbread and a variety of cakes and pies from the trunks of their cars. My cousins and I would enjoy snow cone flavors of strawberry, grape and we knew to be careful not to stain our white Sunday dresses. During the Christmas holidays, on my grandparent’s estate, it was a thrill to go into the woods and select a pine tree and decorate with homemade ornaments. All of the cousins would take part; we really enjoyed roasting nuts in the fireplace at our grandparent’s home. We were “best friends” and we have remained close.

The “American Dream” was always a part of my future. I was taught not to use segregation, racism, and prejudice as an excuse; in doing so, good fortunes would pass me by. The city park was a place we could visit only on the 19th of June; the State Fair of Texas in Dallas designated the 4th Monday in October as “Colored Folks Day.” We would ride the yellow school buses, leaving home early Monday morning, returning after midnight. It did not matter how late we arrived home, we had to be on time to school on Tuesday. There was no such thing as “sleeping in.” We sat in the balcony at the movies; my brother and I could only go to the movies on a Friday night. The movie theatre would be packed on a Saturday. Auntie “Mom” did not want us to get mixed up in the crowd. Another reason we could not attend the movies on Saturday, we had to stay home and respect Aunt Annie’s “Sabbath.” She lived with us; she was my biological mothers’ and Auntie ‘Mom’s” older sister. She was a Seven Day Adventist. That day was set aside for reading good books, writing book reports, relaxing, and practicing piano lessons. We used our imagination, as well as being creative; we did not have a television. Time was set aside to prepare our clothes for Sunday worship and school the following week.

On Thursday of each week, Auntie “Mom,” brother and I shopped for groceries at Piggly Wiggly grocery store. We learned how to make selections by pushing our shopping carts observing what Auntie “Mom put in her cart. Upon completion, she gave us the correct amount to pay our bill. The groceries were displayed on the kitchen shelf; three cans of Crisco shortening, three jars of Miracle Whip salad dressing, three bags of sugar, etc. When only one item was left, we would follow the same routine when there was a need. To this day, I still make purchases in triplicate. Our home was only three blocks from town. Whenever I went to town alone, I was given a certain time to make the round trip. Auntie “Mom” knew how long it would take for me to purchase stamps

and return home. Sometimes, “I thought she was psychic. She ran a tight ship.”

Brother and I had a newspaper route for three defunct Black newspaper companies, namely: The Kansas City Call, Pittsburgh Courier and the Houston Informer. Auntie “Mom” served as the local agent. She used the newspapers, and magazines, to keep us abreast of our heritage and building self-esteem. We always knew about the latest events in Negro society; she subscribed to what is now defunct Ebony and Life magazines and Reader’s Digest. Time has changed; our favorite Ebony magazine was only twenty-five cents a copy. I could hardly wait for the papers and magazines to be delivered to our home. This gave me an opportunity to see what Negroes were doing throughout the United States. Every Wednesday after school, brother and I delivered papers to good paying customers on our blue and red bicycles for ten cents a copy. We received an allowance of \$1.00 weekly.

Even though I am retired, I find myself following the same trend of subscribing to newspapers, magazines, and remaining active in my professional organizations, namely: National Association of Secondary School Principals, Texas Association of Secondary School Principals, Association of Curriculum and Development, National Association of Elementary School Principals, Phi Delta Kappa, Honorary Life Member of the State and National Parent Teacher Associations, Texas Council of Women School Executives, American Association of University Women. Civic organizations include: East Fort Worth Business Association, Fort Worth Black Chamber of Commerce, Multiple Sclerosis Board, Camp Fire Board, Save Our Children, Inc. Founding Board Member of Chase Bank-Stop Six Dunbar Banking Center and Life member of the NAACP. Religious organizations: Church Historian, Adult Sunday school class, Church Announcer, Family Outreach, Scholarship Committee member, and Mission Chorus member. Former Director of Music, pianist for the Sunday school



and Vacation Bible School. Former Superintendent of the Sunday school and Superintendent of the Junior Department of the Sunday school.

Auntie “Mom” taught us how to overcome our adversities. If we were given a lemon, we were told to make lemonade. We could never say, “I can’t.,” we had to learn the poem, “Somebody Said It Couldn’t Be Done,” by Edgar A. Guest.

When the out of adoption text books were issued, we were told not to worry about the condition of the books; we were instructed to gain all of the information that was offered inside the books. In receiving my formal education, I did not experience the pleasure of owning new textbooks. Old band uniforms, used football uniforms and all of the old equipment were given to us from the White high schools. When we were away from home for long hours, Auntie “Mom” packed food in a shoebox with a “jug” of water, in order for us to avoid drinking from the “Colored” water fountains.

As hard as “Auntie “Mom” tried to shield us from the entrapments of segregation, like other children, we were mischievous and curious too. Each day, we walked 16 blocks one way, to school; our route took us through the heart of town past the courthouse. On our return home, we looked forward to stopping at the S. H. Kress Variety Store to purchase a bag of delicious broken chocolate and vanilla cookies for five cents a bag. Our next stop was the basement of the courthouse to get a drink of water. There was very little traffic in the basement; therefore, we would take chances drinking water from fountains marked “White and Colored.” The only difference..the “White” water was icy cold and the “Colored” water was warm. We never thought of the consequences had we been caught. Whenever I walked past the signs, “Colored Only” or “White Only” I thought to myself; I knew the secret. We were given a certain time to arrive home; even with the mischievous detour, we always arrived home on time.

Brother and I knew that if we got into trouble at school, we would receive a “double dose” at home. When I was a freshman in high school and brother was a senior, the principal called our names over the public address system to report to the office. Brother and I waited for each other outside of the principal’s office in a panic mode. We couldn’t imagine the reason for the summons. The principal had been informed by the superintendent that we had to change the spelling of our last name, from B-i-r-d-s-o-n-g to B-y-r-d-s-o-n-g.

A family of White “Birdsongs” lived in the city; a street had been named in their honor. There was no other explanation and no questions asked. I couldn’t believe it!!! *No court order.* We returned to class and that was the last of the conversation. There were other incidents, but we took them in stride and moved forward. However, one in particular still stares me in my face, and that was my high school diploma.

The print on the Diploma:

***Smalltown Colored High School***

*This is to certify that*

*Shirley Byrdsong*

*Has satisfactorily completed the Course of Study*

*Prescribed by the Board of Education for the*

*Colored High School*

*and is therefore entitled to this Diploma.*

Signatures of the Superintendent, School Board Member and Principal were listed

What’s in a name? From “Colored” to “Negro” to “Black” to “African American” and some other names in between.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.”

Receiving a Diploma worded in this form was a “Divine” pre-arrangement; a higher calling, which gave me the drive and stamina that was needed to forge ahead and never look back.

“I’ve lived long enough to realize that everything happens because God said so.” I’ve always kept Auntie “Mom’s” advice in mind. “If given a lemon, make lemonade.” AND THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT I’VE DONE!!! Life has been sweet.”

Even though we received old textbooks at school and the White public library, Auntie “Mom” was smart. She purchased the Reader’s Digest in order for me to keep up to date on recent articles. WORD POWER was my monthly test in order to build my vocabulary.

It was so heartwarming when I was selected by Reader’s Digest as one of ten educators in the nation to receive the 1996 American Hero In Education Award for turning a “troubled” school” around. The school received a monetary award, \$10,000; I received \$5,000. I was not expecting a personal check for myself. After I paid my tithes, gave the students, faculty and staff an ice cream party, I donated the balance to the school and established a 9th grade reading program for students reading below grade level. I solicited donations from businesses and neighbors; we received more than \$60,000 dollars. This program proved beneficial because we were able to select students to participate in a three -week summer program. The students were given pre and post -tests; they were paid \$4.50 an hour for attending classes. They had the privilege of subscribing to the local newspaper for six weeks; they selected a book of their choice along with a subscription to Reader’s Digest. The parents were required to attend sessions with the students. This project made me feel that I had come full circle with Reader’s Digest and all that Auntie “Mom” had instilled within me.

Auntie “Mom’s” accomplishments were many. She was president and organizer of the first Parent Teacher Association in 1946. She was instrumental in purchasing band uniforms and instruments

for the high school; she was chosen citywide on a radio program, by popular vote as “Woman of the Year.” She united with Bethel Baptist in 1926; In 1976, the church paid tribute to her for “fifty plus years” of service. A gold ring with stones of the siblings were presented to Auntie “Mom” along with a mink stole, hat, and dozen red roses. The ladies lounge was named in her honor. She held positions in all areas of the church, namely: church secretary, Sunday school, BTU-Baptist Training Union Director, President, of the Missionary Society, and Youth Director. She supported her pastors and church financially, giving liberally to the Foreign Mission Board.

Everybody knew “Miss Lacy” because she helped so many people. Not only was she an organizer, she was a motivator, fundraiser and a natural leader. There is no doubt in my mind, if she had the opportunity to run for a political office, she would be one to reckon with. She could make the person with the lowest self-esteem feel like somebody; nobody was a stranger to her. She believed in strong family ties and lived in the same location for more than sixty years. Her yard was a showcase of flowers, shrubs, in season and out of season. The American flag was always waving. She urged friends and neighbors to pay their “Poll Tax” in order to vote.

In 1979, at the age of 84, Auntie “Mom” volunteered herself to the local nursing facility where she stayed for fifteen years. I was totally devastated when she announced her plans. I asked, “Oh no! Please come live with me?” Her reply, “Oh no! I do not want to trouble you and your family.” You see, Shirley, “I have lived a good, full life and I do not plan to interfere with your lifestyle.” Further, she stated, “ You have a job, your son to rear, your church and you need to return home and do your very best.” What could I say? What I didn’t know at the time- – during my visits I would take her to visit friends in the nursing facility, she was checking it out for herself. I became her executrix; all she asked of me, was, to pay her bills on time and stay in good graces

with the administrator at the facility. She believed in respecting people in authority. I was trained likewise. The advice she gave me when I started my teaching career: “Your doctor, lawyer, preacher and boss...stick with them.”

At the nursing facility, there were “caregivers” whose lives she touched for five generations. Each “caregiver” could tell me a different story of how they had been helped or inspired in the past. Even though I lived 300 miles round-trip, I was told by the “caregivers,” not to worry.” They took care of “Miss Lacy.” Upon my visits, I would go to the cafeteria and was always told by the lady at the cash register, “It’s on the house.” One “special neighbor” would visit “Miss Lacy” each Sunday and give me a call informing me of her status. Her Sunday School teacher would visit her after Sunday School and review the lesson with her. Ecclesiastes 11:1 – “Cast your bread upon the waters.” It was returned to Auntie “Mom” threefold.

In March, 1994, Auntie “Mom” died at the age of ninety-nine. Before her death I teased her and stated, “If you stopped worrying about everybody, you might be able to live to be 100.” She replied unequivocally, “I don’t want to live to be a hundred.” I replied, “I want you to be able to receive a letter from the President of the United States.”

She was a “stateswoman” in her own right.” I had the opportunity to plan her funeral; on the printed program were so many accolades from people in the State of Texas, other states and local citizens. Uncle Isiah preceded her in death in 1961. He had just given me away in marriage four months prior to his death.

I am sure your question is, “What happened to the four children? Of the forty-one grandchildren, my brother and I were first to receive college degrees. The 18 year old retired after 37 years of teaching first and third grades; the 14 year old, died in 1996, became a registered nurse. Brother spent thirty years in public school education and retired after fifteen years as a



college professor. The 8 year old, “yours truly”, retired in 2004; and continued the legacy of Auntie “Mom” who instilled the same beliefs, values and ideas to more than 15,000 students in an academic setting for a period of 45 years. The motto: “It Can Be Done,” was my daily ritual. “Thank you,” Auntie “Mom,” for your role in my life. Because of you, I, became an organizer, disciplinarian, motivator, visionary, achiever, strategic, learner and a maverick thinker.”

The day I went to live with “Auntie Mom” and Uncle Isaiah was the beginning of the rest of my life. The early training and strength I received from this remarkable woman and man was the driving force for me to succeed in life. I inherited the traits of Auntie “Mom’s” dominant and strong-willed personality; it was intertwined with caring, empathy and compassion. Thank God, my biological mother had the intuition and foresight before her death to make sure that her baby girl and other siblings were left in good hands. She made sure that we were baptized before her death.

Unbenownst to me, I was receiving on the job training for my future long before it was realized. Auntie “Mom’s” rearing taught me planning and how to move forward; further, she taught me not to have a chip on my shoulder and about winning, one-step-at-a-time. The power of prayer and knowing that God is always with me, was my guideline. One of her favorite quotes, “If you put God before you, good folks behind you, the devil will have a hard time getting to you. What A Friend We Have In Jesus.” The routine of her rearing saved me and prepared me for the future. Failure was not an option. As you see, this apple didn’t fall far from the “Family Tree” – which produced good fruit.

“THANK YOU AUNTIE “MOM” AND UNCLE ISIAH!! YOU MADE ME WHAT I AM!”

Finally, this speaks volumes for “a little orphaned girl” who was reared in “the little white house” at 519 North Green Street. Even today I am so grateful for what she and Uncle Isaiah did for me.

*“Silver and Gold have I none, but such as I have,  
give I thee.” –Acts 3:5-6,*

I have no silver or gold, even If I did, I could not have repaid them for the unselfishness, love and guidance they provided for me.

And to be recognized as Texas’ High School Principal of the Year, 2001, at the Washington National Press Club, which gave me an opportunity to tour “The White House – 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D. C. – A dreamed fulfilled.

I felt compelled to write this book, In Class...With Class...It Can Be Done! – A Challenge Clearly Defined.

Enjoy!



**G**od ordains His Chosen for the work of His will. Shirley Knox Benton answered the call of her heart to use her many talents, gifts and strength of character to transform Dunbar High School into a “School of Excellence.” Our community has been the witness of her work and the recipient of the residual blessing. Though her life at this time could assume a posture of reflections, I sense a stirring within her soul that she doesn’t consider her work finished. Dr. Benton’s life has caused us to believe  
“It Can Be Done.”

– Dr. John Lawrence Barnett, Jr.  
1966 graduate of Paul Laurence Dunbar High School

# She Believed She Could... So She Did!

Award-winning High School Principal, Shirley Knox Benton, began this school's academic turnaround the day she moved into the principal's office.

She involved students, teachers, and the community in improving the campus. She kept repeating her motto: **"It CAN Be Done."**

