

SUNLIGHT GIRLS CLUB

I. CONTEXT

When desegregation began in Calhoun County in 1955, black students had to make educational and cultural adjustments as they transferred from living in a segregated society into being submerged into integration; a totally different world for them. Black households were determined to see that their children would get a better education than their parents. They were determined that their children would be raised in a different environment than they had experienced in a world prevalent in racial inequalities and injustice. They wanted them to experience a world of opportunity and prosperity that had been paved by their forefathers who had felt the struggles and pains of slavery and isolation.

The summer before the 1955-56 school year began, a long time educator, Naomi B. Chase, took a group of students from the all black Alice O. Wilkins School on a picnic to Indianola at the LaSalle monument. Port Lavaca resident, Moses Clay, recalls the trip well. In looking back, Clay feels this was Mrs. Chase's way of providing a fond memory to the end of segregated education. "I think she knew what was about to happen and wanted what was best for us." ¹

II. OVERVIEW

With concern for students adjusting to the changes brought on by integration, Mrs. Chase founded the Sunlight Girls Club on January 19, 1960 in her garage. In 1966, the Calhoun County School District, with school board approval, provided the Wilkins School cafeteria as the Sunlight Girls' clubhouse. The Sunlight Girls Club was granted a charter on January 17, 1966 and its

integrated club directors included: Mrs. S.W.Lester, Mrs. Charles Porter, Mrs. D.J. Williams, Mrs. John Green, and Mrs. Naomi Chase. The charter officers were: Deloris Jones, President; Roberta Carter, Vice-President; Patricia Hall, Secretary; Dawn Grigsby, Assistant Secretary; and Lula Ray-Brown, Treasurer.²

The Sunlight Girls Club objectives were: to bridge the gap of integration; to discourage dropouts; to instill and promote finer womanhood; to instill principles of honesty, fair play, and justice; to develop good character through precepts and examples; to promote leadership and complete high school and strive toward higher education; and to provide scholarships for furtherance of education. The Sunlight Girls Club adopted as its theme song "Let the Sun Shine In." The prayer was the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. The colors were yellow and green, and the flower was the chrysanthemum.³

Mrs. Chase organized the first Sunlight Girls Club with 14 girls, ages 9 through 16. Regular attendance at school and church and a high standard of deportment were mandatory for membership. Each girl earned points or demerits. At the end of the year, Mrs. Chase gave each girl a pearl for good deportment.⁴

To further the Sunlight Girls Club's objectives, the first piano was purchased in August 1961. In May of 1962, Dr. S.W. Lester and his wife, Isabel, presented the Club 36 copies of The Golden Book of Favorite Songs. Sammie Diebel also was a contributor in helping purchase sheet music for the Club members. Mrs. Lester was instrumental in presenting a music scholarship to

Club member Bonnie Fitzgerald, who now holds a music degree from Prairie View A & M University.⁵

Experts in various fields were provided to promote proper growth and achievement for the girls. The Reverend B.C. Brown, pastor of the Mt. Sinai Baptist Church, served as Spiritual Advisor for 19 years. Artie Kitchen was the Sunlight Girls Club's first bible instructor and piano teacher. Susan Dixon was the first lecturer and was chosen as the Sunlight Girls first "Mother of the Year." Mrs. Leroy Bennett, a Victoria county educator, was the first anniversary speaker. Martha Barefield instructed basic typing. Joyce Williams, L.V.N., taught first aid. Sunlight Girls Club founder, Mrs. Chase, a certified home economics teacher, taught cooking, sewing, and ceramics.⁶

In 1964, to continue with the girls' growth and exposure, Edna Brown organized and directed the Sunlight Girls Club's first band in her garage. Several band instruments were donated by local citizens.⁷

In November 1965, the Mothers League was organized. Port Lavaca attorney, Dan Heard, provided legal assistance for the charter at no cost. Charter officers of the Mothers League members were: Winnie Grigsby, President; Florida Edwards, Vice-President; Hattie Jones, Secretary; and Jenell Butler, Treasurer. Other members included Mrs. Woodie Collier, Donnia Hollingsworth, Elizabeth Brown, Joyce Williams, Reva Fitzgerald, Martha Boone, Dorothy Leonard, and Edna Brown who worked with the club for 36 years. In 1986, Mrs. Brown became Sunlight Girls Club sponsor after the death of Mrs. Chase. Earline

Hamilton worked with Mrs. Brown as co-sponsor,⁸ and educator Ada Grace Harrison served as a director.⁹

The Mothers League was instrumental in generating the scholarship fund which was a mother-daughter contest fund raiser. The Sweetheart Coronation ceremony was held annually on the first Friday in April. The girl who raised the most funds was crowned "Sweetheart". Linda Hall was crowned the first Sunlight Girls Club Sweetheart. The first Sweetheart attire was a white formal gown donated by Christina Lester-Westfall, who had worn it in her wedding.¹⁰

The first graduates of the Sunlight Girls Club, Deloris Jones-White and Patricia Hall-Bell, received a piece of luggage and \$100.¹¹ After the scholarships were generated, the girls received a piece of luggage and \$600 each semester for eight semesters. For a time, the Junior Service League awarded an annual scholarship to the most outstanding Sunlight Girls Club high school graduate.¹²

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The Sunlight Girls Club provided an opportunity for black girls, experiencing the transition from segregation to integration, to receive a quality life skills education and become instilled with the principles of finer womanhood which emphasized social etiquette.¹³ The former members, both girls and mothers, are deeply indebted to Mrs. Chase and Mrs. Brown for instilling in them the principles of integrity, dignity and grace. Both sponsors and directors helped to open the doors that parents could only dream of for their sons and daughters.

Approximately 312 girls were members of the Sunlight Girls Club within its 40 years of existence. Today, many of these young girls have received higher

educations and serve as leaders in the communities where they reside. Many have returned to Port Lavaca to give back to their community by sharing their personal stories. Deloris Jones-White emphasized, “You can be successful if you set your goals and stick to them.”¹⁴

A Texas Historical Marker for the Sunlight Girls Club will provide an important historical integration record and emphasize the willingness of young women to achieve their full potential.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹ The Port Lavaca Wave, Calhoun County Newspaper, Recalling Integration, Vol.121 #38, Feb.22, 2012, pg. A4.

² 40th Sunlight Girls Anniversary Celebration Program History (excerpt) Jan. 2000.

³ City of Port Lavaca, Port Lavaca, Texas, 150th Birthday Celebration 1840-1990, pg. 106.

⁴ Personal Interview with Jenell Butler by Mary Belle Meitzen, Port Lavaca, Texas, Mar. 16, 2012.

⁵ 40th Sunlight Girls Anniversary Celebration Program History, Jan. 2000.

⁶ 40th Sunlight Girls Anniversary Celebration Program History, Jan. 2000.

⁷ City of Port Lavaca, 150th Birthday Celebration, pg. 106.

⁸ City of Port Lavaca, 150th Birthday Celebration, Sunlight Girls Mother’s League, pg.105.

⁹ Personal Interview with Nick Harrison by Mary Meitzen on Mar. 25, 2012.

¹⁰ 40th Sunlight Girls Anniversary Celebration Program History, Jan. 2000.

¹¹ Deloris White interview with Patricia Bell, Sept. 16, 2012, Via telephone.

¹² 40th Sunlight Girls Anniversary Celebration Program History, Jan. 2000.

¹³ The Port Lavaca Wave, Exhibit Highlights African-American Education, Sat., Feb. 25, 2012, Vol. 121, No. 39, pg. A8

¹⁴ Personal Interview with Deloris White by Mary Meitzen, Sept. 20, 2012, Port Lavaca, TX.