

Barbara Sorey-Love

Thank you so much, Barbara, for taking the time, especially during the busy holiday season, to share information about the re-discovery of the North Greenwood African American Memorial Cemetery and your experiences here in Clearwater.

Barbara, can you introduce yourself and share a little bit about your experience growing up here in Clearwater?

My name is Barbara J. Sorey-Love. I was born in the basement of Morton Plant Hospital on January 17, 1952. Our family lived in Clearwater Heights. Our address was 1161 Gould St. I attended Williams Elementary School on South Madison Ave. Clearwater Heights. Williams Elementary was the first segregated school built for African Americans in 1947 after WW2. I have two sisters, Janet Marie and Jenifer. Some of the self-contained businesses in our neighborhood included **Swanson's Grocery** owned by Mr. Swanson, **William Tell Bar** owned by Mr. Quinton Rembert, A Barber Shop, **Isaacs Cab** owned by Mr. Issacs. Jonas Merricks owned a laundromat. These businesses were located on Washington Ave., which was our main business district. Mrs. Rose Bryant, a seamstress, lived on Brownell St.; Mrs. Jackson, a hairdresser, lived on S. Madison Ave.; Mr. Walker owned a corner store on Madison Ave. and Brownell St.

What was your career path?

From 1972 to 2006 I was employed, full-time, with two companies as a Production and Inventory Control/Materials Manager. I worked at Square D Company for 15 ½ years followed by ConMed Linvatec for 18 ½ years. Since retiring, I've written and published 5 books. Currently, I am the publisher of two newspapers: *The Bulletin News* (Tampa Bay) and *Long Beach Times* (Long Beach, CA.).

Ms. Sorey-Love, can you tell us how and when you came to head up the Clearwater African American Memorial Committee and what work the committee has done?

I morphed into the role. This started as the Clearwater Heights Reunion Committee in December 2016. Four (4) of us (Ruth Rembert Bryant, Tameka Barber, Lynette Miller and myself) got together to plan a reunion (our sole purpose) for those of us who grew up on "The Heights" as we referred to the bustling community of Black families who lived in the neighborhood West of Missouri Ave., North of Court St, East of Greenwood Ave (MLK) and South of Cleveland St. Lynette and Tameka left the group and soon after, Muhammad Abdur-Rahim joined us.

We held our monthly meetings at the North Greenwood Library. Our discussions included reflections of our school, Williams Elementary, which for me was the center of activity on the weekends. Everybody met in the core at Williams on Saturdays and Sundays. We'd play our transistor radios, listen to WTMP 1150, play games - including dodge ball, and socialize. I was always one of the younger kids who looked up to the older kids, the teenagers.

During that time the original Pinellas High School building still stood on S. Madison Ave near Pierce St. The original high school had closed but the building remained. As our meetings progressed, Ms. Wanda Rembert Arnold (Ruth's older sister) came to one of our meetings and said she'd traced all of their family members being moved from the Heights cemetery, except for their grandfather, Thomas

Jefferson Rembert. We listened and redirected our conversations to include “What happened to the cemetery?”

Muhammad, who retired from the City of Clearwater, was able to get an aerial map of the area which showed the parcel of land that outlined the school; however, nothing on the map indicated there was ever a cemetery. That’s when our ‘erased cemetery’ interest peaked, including answering the question ‘What happened to the North Greenwood Cemetery?’

Through those progressions and discussions the name of our group changed to Clearwater African American Memorial Cemeteries Committee. On August 22, 2019, I filed a legal redress with the NAACP Clearwater/Upper Pinellas County Branch 5096 to get answers to the question, ‘What happened to the cemeteries?’

Ms. Rembert’s family and other descendants needed closure. Our community needs closure.

Barbara, I know you recognize and value the importance of education, you are a published author, in particular, two non-fiction books: *Florida Girl: Short Stories of Family, Community & History: 1804-1969* and *Know Where You Going? You Gotta Know Where You Been!* With that in mind, I’d like to know your thoughts on the inscription on the Historic Marker:

Acknowledging the needs of Clearwater’s growing Black community, the city commission created North Greenwood Cemetery, also known as the “Clearwater Colored Cemetery.” On January 2, 1940, the city adopted a resolution that established a 1.5 acre segregated cemetery on city land. It stated that “...no burials of Negroes shall be permitted in Clearwater other than on the described property.” That action ended the use of the private cemetery at Saint Matthew Baptist Church, established in 1909 in the Clearwater Heights neighborhood to the south of this location, as the primary African American burial ground.

In 1947, the Pinellas County Superintendent of Schools reported that segregated school buildings in Clearwater were obsolete and a fire hazard, and undertook a search for a new school site. The city also sought a location for a “permanent Negro recreation area” that would include a pool, gymnasium, and ball field.

By 1954, the city and school board joined efforts to construct Pinellas High School and a recreation area on a 30-acre tract of city land. The arrangement included a land swap whereby the North Greenwood cemetery plot would be given to the school board in exchange for land to construct the pool. As part of the deal with the school board, the city commission agreed to relocate the graves. They approved a work order to move “no more than 375 bodies” from the city cemetery to a new location east of Dunedin, today known as Park Lawn Memorial Cemetery.

In 1961-1962, Palmetto Elementary School was built on the North Greenwood Cemetery site. In 2019, it was discovered that only the marked graves were relocated, leaving several unmarked and displaced graves behind. This was revealed after extensive media coverage, input from the community, and help from the Clearwater/Upper Pinellas County Branch of the NAACP, Clearwater Historical Society, Florida Public Archaeology Network, the Cultural Resource Division of Cardno, Pinellas County Schools, and the City of Clearwater.

This site remains a cemetery and reflects the history of the African American community with burial customs that can be traced back to the time of enslavement. Over the years, loved ones left items on graves like coins, glass flower vases, and conch shells as acts of remembrance. Though no longer visible, these artifacts and the many graves where they were placed remain here in areas on both sides of Holt Avenue.

As a child growing up, I'd often hear the elders when referring to someone they thought had gone astray or forgotten their roots or the way they were raised 'chile fo' they know whey they going, they gotta know whey they been' (vernacular). I thought deeply about the Clearwater Heights community that has vanished before my eyes because of eminent domain and racism. A warm and caring community. Several times in conversation, Muhammad remembers his family from South Carolina specifically coming to 'The Heights' because our community was known as a safe haven to raise a family. The Historic Marker tells part of the documented story. People who read it will know 'where we've come from and where we've been' as African American people here in Clearwater, Florida, MY HOME.

Did you play a part in shaping what is inscribed?

Yes. I am proud to say that I am a member of the Historic Marker Committee. Other members include descendant, Triva Mack; Jeff Moates, Regional Director of the Florida Public Archeology Network; Pinellas County Schools Associate Superintendent for Operational Services, Clinton Herbic; and Clearwater Historical Society President, Allison Dolan.

You chose to sing an A cappella song during the memorial dedication, which I believe was the most moving and memorable part of the ceremony. Can you share what song you chose and why?

As I composed the list of speakers and thought about what I was going to present, I realized the descendants and others who came before me on the program line up would have shared their history, there was no need for me to add. I thought about the Clearwater African American Cemeteries Memorial Committee's mission statement: 'To Memorialize, honor and preserve the memory and the remains of those buried at the historic erased African American cemeteries in the City of Clearwater.' That was enough. To me, singing 'Amazing Grace' was most appropriate. The lyrics are powerful: 'I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see!' My faith in God and His promises have kept me on this course to honor our truths.

Do you envision more being done at the site of these unmarked graves?

Yes. There will be more done at the site of these unmarked graves to properly memorialize them. The City of Clearwater, Pinellas County Schools, FrankCrumStaffing Reps, NAACP Clearwater/Upper Pinellas Branch 5096, and the community are meeting to discuss and implement courses of action.

The committee is in discussions on how to locate and contact descendants in an effort to invite their involvement and to add their descendant's name to a Memorial Wall that will be erected at each site.

What are the most important things you would like people to know about the re-discovered African American graves at the two sites in Clearwater?

The most important thing that I would like people to know is the importance of sharing your history with your family in writing or orally. Ms. Rembert's grandfather's birth and death was written in their family Bible. As often as I can, I tell the story of how my Griot Mother repeatedly told my sisters and me (ages 5 & 6) about how she was raised on a farm in North Florida. She and our dad came to Clearwater in 1947. We'd sit at our kitchen table in our home on Gould Street and over and over she'd share the same stories. I remember holding my little 6-year-old head in the palms of my hands because I'd grow tired of listening to the same old stories. Now, I realize they were relevant to where I am today with the books I've written and the cemetery journey. The Bible tells us in Deuteronomy Chapter 6: verses 6-9 to write and tell our stories diligently!

Is there anything else you'd like to share? Anything in your research that really surprised you?

There is nothing new in this research that has surprised me. When I began writing in 2005, I was surprised there wasn't more written history of Clearwater's African American history in the library and today, 17 years later, unfortunately, much hasn't changed. I appreciate this opportunity to tell a bit of my story, my history, others' history, the history of my community.

I appreciate Mrs. Christine Wigfall Morris, Clearwater's first African American librarian for allowing me to pen her memoir. I appreciate Pinellas County African American Museum's Sandra Rooks and Randolph Lightfoot for publishing their books on African American Clearwater. I am grateful for Mt. Olive AME Church, for opening the James C. Rembert Reading Library. I don't take this season of opportunity for granted.

Thank you to all who have made the cemetery reveal possible. Essie Rayner Jones (our first interviewee); *Tampa Bay Times* reporter, Paul Guzzo; WTSP Channel 10 News reporter, Emerald Morrow; the reporting team of *60 Minutes*; Spectrum Bay News 9; St. Matthew Baptist Church; and anyone who has been instrumental in where we are today in this progression.

If people want to learn more, or join you in your work, how can they contact you?

People can email me at clearwaterafricanamerican@gmail.com. Currently, I am in the process of finalizing my 501c3 non-profit corporation whose mission is: To document, celebrate, promote and memorialize Clearwater African American cemeteries, landmarks and buildings within the City of Clearwater and County of Pinellas.

People can access more information at this website: clearwaterafricanamericanfoundation.com

There is so much Clearwater African American history yet to be uncovered! Thank you for the opportunity to share this bit of my work with you.

