

# Charlotte public health nursing pioneer tells her story

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At age 86, Thereasea Elder (affectionately known as "T.D.") is working hard to preserve history. She does it year-round.

The work gets even more interesting when she shares her own history-making steps in the field of nursing.

She speaks to various groups regularly. Elder recently spoke to members of the Norwest Chapter of AARP No. 5087 about integrating the public health nursing profession in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

With the style of a Baptist minister, Elder shared a few of the challenges she encountered in working as a public health nurse with the Mecklenburg County Health Department from 1962 to 1989. She included scripture and Bible verses during her presentation.

During that meeting, Sarah Stevenson, 88, the first African-American female school board member, also shared her life story and historical contributions to Charlotte. Both women credited their faith with getting them through life's challenges.

Elder was born and reared in Charlotte. Her birth name was Thereasea Delerine Clark. She grew up in the Greenville area of Charlotte and attended West Charlotte High School.

Over the course of several years, she attended Johnson C. Smith University, the U.S. Cadet Nursing Program and the Lincoln Hospital School of Nursing in Durham. She also studied pediatrics at Howard University's Freeman Hospital in Washington, D.C.

After graduation she did further studies at UNC Chapel Hill, Livingstone College and JCSU again.

In 1948, Elder came back to Charlotte to work at Good Samaritan Hospital – the hospital for African-Americans in those days of segregation – and married her sweetheart, Willie Elder. He was a World War II veteran who worked with the Army Corps of Engineers. Later he ran a service station.

Together, they built their home from the ground up in the Derita area. They had two sons who are now engineers. One lives in Charlotte and the other in Michigan. Elder is also the grandmother of three children and great-grandmother of three.

After being certified as a public health nurse, Elder worked at the Mecklenburg County Health Department until she retired in 1989. When she started, she could go only to African-American homes and schools.

"When schools integrated in the 1970s," Elder said, "the health department changed their policies, and African-American nurses could treat everyone."

She candidly tells stories of challenges she faced.

"Oh, we had a hard time. They sent us to KKK territory near the airport, but we were determined to do our jobs," she said.

Elder told the group how some patients in Mecklenburg County would remove their addresses to make it harder for African-American nurses to visit their homes. The nurses provided medical treatment to patients even as they were called derogatory names.

"There were some patients who even placed guns nearby while being treated," said Elder.

She said her faith and trust in God got her through every step of her life. She has always been active in Second Calvary Baptist Church (her dad was the first deacon there). Elder still serves on the church's Missionary Ministry and Community Development Corp.

Throughout her life she has been involved in a wide range of organizations and causes. She has too many awards and affiliations to list.

A book about her has been published, titled "T.D.'s Truths," by Stanley R. Frazier and Janice Frazier. She has been inducted into the International Nurses Association and the International Women's Leadership Association.

Since 1977, Elder has been a member of the Negro Women's Business and Professional Association. As a charter member of the local chapter, she founded its Hall of Fame to honor women in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community.

"Each recipient honored must contribute a notebook of their life," she said. "Most people have not compiled a history of their life to pass on to the next generation."

She started keeping notebooks of her life when her first grandson was born. "He is about 35 years old now. I noticed that too many women were accomplishing a lot in life ... and their family was not fully aware of their contributions."

She said she started the Greenville Historical Society too many years ago to remember. In 2000, Elder founded the Charlotte Mecklenburg Black Heritage Committee because she believed knowing your history and passing it on is very important.

Elder is also a charter member of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture.

"I'd like to start a society here in Charlotte, so that we can take a bus to Washington, D.C., in 2015, when the museum opens," she said.

The Park and Recreation Department created a park in her Rockwell Park neighborhood in honor of her. The Thereasea Clark Elder Neighborhood Park is at 6315 Rockwell Church Road.

Elder exhibits the traits of a servant leader. She also has an indefatigable passion to preserve history. It's one thing to read about history, but hearing the stories directly from the people who made history has a lasting impact.

A county park is named in her honor:



# Thereasea Clark Elder Neighborhood Park

• 6315 Rockwell Church Road •

Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department  
*The Natural Place To Be...*