

Kirby: Spring Lake woman earns honorary degree 57 years after breaking color barrier



Ammie Jenkins (right, holding her honorary degree) is joined by friends and family members on stage at High Point University on Aug. 13 after she was presented an honorary degree. HPU President Nido Qubein (in blue blazer) is to Jenkins' left.

By [Bill Kirby](#)
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Ammie McRae Jenkins was a 21-year-old in pursuit of an education, when she enrolled as the first African American student at High Point University.

SPRING LAKE — Ammie McRae Jenkins never will forget enrolling 57 years ago at High Point University as its first African-American student.

Now give it some thought.

The year was 1962, when the south was embroiled in the throes of the civil rights movement, and here's a 21-year-old black woman registering for classes at an all-white college.

"As you know, it was during the civil rights era," Jenkins, 78, says. "We had just had marches in High Point, and it was a turbulent time."

Jenkins was married and living along Vernon Street, where she was helping her wheelchair-bound aunt, in the home within walking distance of the college.

"I enrolled because I wanted to further my education, and the school was in a convenient location," says Jenkins, a 1959 graduate of Anne Chesnut High School. "I was too naive to be nervous or afraid. It only made sense if I wanted to go to school, and the school was in my back yard. But I enrolled, I was accepted and I was there to get an education."

Jenkins would spend just three semesters in pursuit of a business degree, she says, before dropping out for financial reasons shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, in Dallas.

"But I was determined to get an education," Jenkins says. "My husband and I decided we would enroll in the Electronic Institute of Computer Programming in Greensboro. We were the first husband and wife team to graduate from the institute."

After graduation, the couple moved to Durham, raised a son and daughter, and in 2001 Ammie McRae Jenkins founded the Sandhills Family Heritage Association in Spring Lake. The association is a nonprofit that provides programs and services to improve the quality of life of under-served families in Cumberland, Harnett, Hoke, Lee and Moore counties.

"We offer programs of H.O.P.E.," Jenkins says. "The 'H' for history and heritage; the 'O' for outreach education; the 'P' for protection of our land and natural resources; and the 'E' for economic self-sufficiency. We have a wide-range of community engagement projects for kids, teenagers, young adults and seniors."

Jenkins grew up in McRae Town, a small community adjacent to the old Rockefeller estate in Overhills in Harnett County, where she learned to give back to the community.

"My extended family and community members helped my mother raise seven children," Jenkins says. "This family situation was the inspiration for founding the SFHA to give hope and help families in need of assistance."

And it is because of her work and mission for almost two decades that Jenkins found herself on Tuesday back at High Point University, where she was recognized not only as the school's first African-American student, but for her benevolent heart for others.

And like 57 years ago, when Ammie McRae Jenkins was a young freshman setting foot on campus, Tuesday was a day she never will forget.

“I was really surprised when I received a call from the university president, Dr. Nido Qubein, on May 28 — my 78th birthday,” Jenkins says. “He said the school wanted to honor me as the first African-American to attend High Point College and to recognize the work the SFHA is doing in the community.”

Jenkins says it was an honor to be recognized, but she wanted to share the special occasion with people who supported her and helped to make the organization a success.

“It was a beautiful day,” Jenkins says, “and a memory I will always cherish.”

Jenkins says she was proud to have her daughter, Cassandra Jenkins Bush; granddaughter, Kiara Bush; sister, Josephine Robisch; brother, Jimmy McRae; nephews, Jeffery McRae and James McRae; cousin, Deanna McRae; her pastor, the Rev. Vincent Long and his wife, Michelle, from Bethel AME Zion Church; the Spring Lake mayor, Larry Dobbins; and SFHA board members and volunteers in attendance.

Qubein, the school president, had something more for Jenkins before Tuesday was done — an honorary degree on behalf of the school’s board of trustees.

“I can’t tell you how proud I am that you have chosen to come and be with us today,” Qubein told Jenkins. “I’m convinced you have influenced so many people in your life. You may not have finished your degree at High Point University, so all of us here today wish to bestow upon you an honorary degree. This is exceptionally rare. We don’t provide honorary degrees often. This is a precious gift from our hearts to your heart to show that you have been a champion, and you have turned that into purposeful endeavors throughout your life.”

The moment was poignant.

“With a grateful heart I accepted,” Jenkins says about the degree she once pursued as that 21-year-old student with the pretty smile 57 years ago. “I am blessed to be doing work that I enjoy and to receive this honor was the icing on the cake.”

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