

VERO BEACH CENTENNIAL

Vero Heritage recognizes Idlette's fight for justice as a Pioneer family

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Published 1:03 p.m. ET May 8, 2018 | Updated 1:52 p.m. ET May 8, 2018

Not many people can say they changed the course of history, but Joe Idlette Jr. is among the few who qualifies.

But ever humble, you will not hear Idlette touting how he changed the trajectory of education in Indian River County when he successfully fought to end segregation in the public schools. "My mission was to end the separation for equal justice," he said.

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Recently, Idlette and his wife, Bernice, who both grew up in Gifford, were recognized for their family's contribution to Indian River County by Vero Heritage Inc. at the organization's annual Pioneer Family Award Dinner.

The Idlettes and their six children were the 18th family to receive the award, and the first African American family.

1920s

Janie Gould, a board member of Vero Heritage Inc. and a member of the pioneer dinner committee, said the Idlettes exemplified everything the board looked for when selecting the outstanding pioneer family for the year. "They are hard-working, family centered and community minded," Gould said. "Their roots here date back to the early 1920s, making them true Florida pioneers."

Joe Idlette Jr. achieved his goal of school desegregation in Indian River County in 1969 with the help of a lawyer from the NAACP, but his fight for justice began more than a decade before when he returned to Gifford after serving in the Korean war.

As a veteran, he saw the injustice of segregation with renewed eyes.

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"I fought for my country and then come home to being 'less than,'" he said. "We still couldn't go to many restaurants and other places in town. And the only public beach we were allowed to go to was way far north in Wabasso."

Addressing the inequality, particularly in the area of education, became paramount to him and his wife when they started having children. At the time, schools in Indian River County and throughout the south were racially segregated, protected by the Supreme Court ruling that upheld the "Separate but Equal" practice in education.

Less than equal

But in reality, there was nothing equal about it in any area, including education. Black-only schools were almost always much worse than white schools, including structurally and supplies-wise. The Indian River black-only schools were no exception.

As Idlette recalls, the buildings were dilapidated and did not have nearly the resources the white schools had. "I was a parent and wanted what was best for our kids and we weren't getting it where we were. We had two different school systems. One was elite and one was deprived," he said

With the help of the lawyer from the NAACP, Idlette started formally challenging the Indian River Board of Education in 1964. By then the Supreme Court's landmark ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* that deemed segregation of public schools unconstitutional, and desegregation was to be executed by states "with all deliberate speed," was a decade old.

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Enforcing the "all deliberate speed" part of the ruling proved to be difficult, and it took Idlette, who also had a full-time job at Patrick Air Force Base, five years to attain his goal.

And it took a lot of courage. "I would answer the phone and people would threaten our lives," recalled Idlette. The FBI warned him that his family had become a target of the local Ku Klux Klan. "You never knew who to trust," he said.

These kinds of threats were the reason many men and women in the civil rights movement gave up, but not Idlette, who was tenacious in his goal for justice. The great grandson of

slaves and son of a Georgia sharecropper, he knew all about hard work and overcoming odds, and was determined to do his part in improving the lives of his children.

Faith

And he could not have done it without his faith (his family are members of Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal church in Vero Beach) and the support of his wife, Bernice, who was a full-time mother. Eventually Bernice Idlette went to cosmetology school when her kids got older, and she also volunteered for the Indian River hospital for 11 years.

Her parents, who descended from slaves, moved from South Carolina to Gifford when she was 6 months old. She met Idlette, who was born in Gifford, growing up. They started dating in high school in Gifford, and were the first in their families to earn a high school diploma.

Today, the couple, married 62 years, takes great pride in their six of children, (all of whom earned high school diplomas and some of whom graduated from college), 10 grandchildren (all of whom received high school diplomas) and three great-grandchildren.

Integration

In 1969, Idlette finally attained his goal of desegregation for schools throughout Indian River County. It turned out to be a double win, because soon thereafter he was elected to IRC's Board of Education on which he served for 20 years.

Idlette cherishes those years on the board, but as dear to him, if not more, was the smooth transition of integration in Indian River County. This was a stark contrast to many other school transitions in the country.

Fortunately, no police or military were needed when Indian River County integrated Vero Beach High School, middle school and elementary schools. One of their six children, Joe III, remembers this time well.

He was 13, and says that even though he was one of only about three black kids in the Vero Beach High School, the transition was relatively easy thanks to (mostly) nice classmates and support from his parents.

“My mother and father prepared us how to deal with whatever we had to deal with. We had problems, but overall, we made it and it wasn't too bad. Of course, there were a few kids who

did some name calling, but I just did my own thing. And by the time I graduated, things had improved even more,” Joe Idlette III said.

Joe Idlette III, inspired by his father and mother, became very active in the local community in addition to holding a full-time job working for the city of Vero Beach. Now retired, he spends most of his time dedicated to Indian River County and is on the Economic Development Board and the board of the Housing Authority, ensuring affordable housing in the area.

He is also president of the Progressive Civic League of Gifford, and has spent years volunteering with the county's recreational department. What's more, he spends several hours a week helping his mother care for his father, who is now on dialysis.

Community minded

And Joe Idlette II is not the only one of his siblings who is active in the community. His sister, Jody, is the principal of Sebastian River Middle School and was awarded Principal of the Year in 2015. His sister, Jennifer, used to be a principal of Storm Grove and is now transportation director for the Indian River County School District.

She says her father's activism inspired her. “To grow up witnessing his commitment to provide equal and high quality education for all students has played a very significant role in my career path,” she said. “Every child can learn when provided a conducive learning environment in conjunction with high quality instruction.”

Jennifer Idlette's optimism is redolent in the Idlette family. It's been 47 years since school integration in Indian River County, and Joe Idlette Jr. says that social, racial progress continues to be made.

“I think it's getting better all time. Listen we are all growing and there will always be room for growth,” he said. “And I think Indian River County is a very special place. Change has been tremendous and good and there a lot of good people and friends of ours living in Indian River County of all colors.”