

Nakeiha Primus

May 2005

Interviews with: Mr. James Sherwood, Jr.
Mrs. Judith Carrington
Mrs. Louise Jordan

James and Ada Sherwood

You are cordially invited to a celebration! This, however, is unlike any party you have ever attended. It is a celebration of life, family, relationships and community. It is a gathering of a myriad of voices, each of which speaks of the spirits and contributions of James and Ada Sherwood, two people wholly invested in each dimension of their personal and professional lives.

The story of this dynamic couple began long before they met each other. It started with their individual families and the circumstances in which they grew up. Although from different parts of the United States and living in different environments, these two walked similar paths.

James Sherwood Sr. grew up in the tight-knit community of West Medford in a time when money was low, jobs were scarce, and the need to survive outweighed the need to thrive. He was born on September 7, 1925 to Walter, a World War I veteran, and Carrie Mae Sherwood. Like most couples in the 1920s and 30s, the Sherwoods were affected by the Depression, but managed to maintain a household and create a supportive family unit. James was the youngest of the family and followed Helen, Ruth, Sonny, and Wilber. Scenes from the life of a young James Sherwood seemed to have mirrored the lives of many young men during this time. He was outgoing, fun-loving, and enjoyed sports.

While growing up in West Medford, James made a name for himself through sports. He excelled in both football and track while attending Medford High School. Though well known

for his athletic prowess, there were times in his life where the gaze of racism was cast on him and brought the reality of the era up-close and personal. His son, James Jr., recalls a story of how this transpired on the football field: *“I remember him telling me...now you can imagine there weren’t that many Blacks on the football team during that time. He would be in situations, I think it was Brockton [...] they [White coaches] actually yelled out, ‘Get that nigger!’ And he got four touchdowns that game, so I guess they didn’t get him.”* Such was the predicament of many Black men and women mid-century. The experiences of bigotry and discrimination were perhaps just as commonplace in Northern areas of the U.S. as they were in the South. Yet, despite this and with the support of his family, James graduated from high school. Following in the footsteps of his father, he thereafter joined the armed forces. He enlisted in the Navy and participated in World War II as an airplane mechanic. After serving in the Navy, he continued with his education at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. It was here that he became acquainted with Ms. Adalouise Dupee.

Adalouise Dupee, affectionately known as Ada, grew up in the city of Indianapolis, Indiana. She was born to James and Charley Dupee on December 17, 1929. Unlike West Medford, the inner city prepared young Ada to acquire an uncanny “street smarts” and awareness. She was able to foresee situations, read people, and even tell where people were from based on their accents. Ada relied substantially on her mother, Charley. Ada’s son, James Jr. recalls her family situation in Indianapolis:

My grandmother actually took care of her mother, father, grandmother and one other in the house. I get confused when I think about it. But she had four people in the house and my mother. She was taking care of everybody...cooking, bringing in the money [...] It

was all that going on and trying to take care of my mother, at the same time determined to make it work. So within all that she brought my mother up pretty well [...]

It is possible that Ada developed her selflessness and willingness to help others-- personality traits often mentioned to describe her-- from her mother's strong role in the family. Ada attended Crispus Attacus High School and through hard work accompanied by family support, was accepted into Fisk University.

Around 1949, both James Sherwood and Adalouise Dupee entered Fisk, a historically black university, as first-year students. According to the university's website:

Fisk University was founded in 1866 as a liberal arts institution committed to educating the newly freed slaves. The first students ranged in age from seven to seventy, but shared common experiences of slavery and poverty — and an extraordinary thirst for learning. Today Fisk has become a leading historically black institution where the tradition of leadership, excellence and intellectual development continues. (www.fisk.edu).

Not much is known about the course work and activities that James and Ada participated in while at Fisk. But while there, each acquired a motivation for learning and knowledge that greatly influenced their decisions to enter the field of education as teachers.

After graduating from Fisk University, James and Ada married. As a couple they returned to West Medford and settled at 118 Harvard Avenue. According to Louise Jordan, friend and colleague of Ada, *“They lived on Harvard Avenue in a charming stucco house. It had*

a grand yard with a large apple tree. One day I recall her father-in-law fell from the tree while gathering apples for one of Ada's delicious pies."

Acclimating to the suburban city of Medford, Mrs. Sherwood came into contact with situations and people that were new to her. While in Indianapolis many of Ada's experiences were characterized by interactions with other Black people. West Medford was different. More racially diverse and less urban, in West Medford Ada came into contact with white people when she went to the doctor, the dentist, and the grocery store in the neighborhood. This had not been her experience in Indiana.

One way she stayed connected to her friends and family in Indiana was to write. Ada was known for her beautiful handwriting, and during down time or lunch breaks would write to her parents, school friends and others. She would walk to the mailbox at the end of the day with a handful of letters to be mailed. Ada and James began a life for themselves. On September 6, 1952, they welcomed their son, James Sherwood, Jr. to the world. Family life on Harvard Avenue was vibrant and full. The home was owned by Walter Sherwood, James' father, and was shared not only by James, Ada, and James Jr., but also by other family members as well. James Sr.'s' niece, Judith ("Judi") Carrington also lived in the two-family home with her family. In addition to extended family within the walls of 118 Harvard Avenue, family surrounded the Sherwoods, some living on Harvard Avenue and others within walking distance. Judith Carrington described to me what it was like to have family so close by while growing up:

JC: The siblings were here within the community. My father [James Sr.'s brother] was in the house because it was a two-family. We lived there with young Jim. And a sister next door actually. My father was the oldest and there was Helen who lived next door. Sonny

Sherwood, who was the city messenger, who lived at the next corner, corner of Sharon and Harvard. And then another sister who lived further down on Harvard; Ruthie; Ruth Sherwood Lassiter

NP: *How was living so close together...?*

JC: *Great. Really great. I'm an only child so it was really great for me because the cousins were all like sisters and brothers.*

With cousins, grandparents and siblings all living within close distance to each other, a strong family bond was established. For Judi Carrington's daughter, Terri Lyne, James and Ada often acted as her second set of parents. This type of family dynamic expanded the connectedness of the entire Sherwood home. As Mrs. Carrington stated, *"Everyone was like everyone else's kid."* The Sherwood family and close friends often took vacations together; visiting Indiana to spend time with Ada's family or going down to Martha's Vineyard, where James and Ada owned a home.

The relationships that characterize this family add valuable insights into the personalities of James and Ada Sherwood. To James Jr., his parents were caring, generous, strict, and fostered a sense of independence within their son. To Judi Carrington, they started as aunt and uncle and became extremely close friends. The Sherwoods held their personal relationships dear, and as James, Jr. stated in his interview, *"If you were friends with my people, you were in good shape. Good shape all the way around."* James and Ada's relationship was also significant because of the love they had for each other. One instance of this love for one another occurred when James bought Ada a new car. Judi Carrington recalls the experience: *"I'll tell you something just to give you insight to his personality. He bought her [Ada] a care one day, with Jimmy's help,*

drove up in front of the school and put a huge, huge bow on top, rang the bell and one of the students, of course, had answered the door and went back in for her and they pulled her out of class. Lo and behold there was a car.” This type of bond also helped to foster interactions outside their family. These types of associations often manifested themselves in large parties, cook-outs, and other get-togethers that the Sherwoods were famous for organizing. James Jr. recalls:

One of the key things, when I think about my parents...my parents were party folks. Yeah, oh yeah. I remember it was nothing for me to come home [...] and there'd be a house full of people. And that's what I came up on [...] Plenty, plenty of partying [...] And if it wasn't indoors, it was outdoors [...] Because at my house when it was warm weather, it all happened outdoors and when it was cold weather, it all happened indoors. And people drove up, strolled up, walked up, rode up, whatever way they could come up and they came into the yard [...] But it was always social stuff. And then my cousin Judi, she had cookouts too. And Dolores next door had cookouts, as well as some other folks in the community [...] But that's one thing that stands out for me...people, people all the time.

With the house full of delectable aromas, compliments of Ada's famed cooking, music playing and the house over-spilling with guests, the Sherwoods welcomed the community into their home. They were not a boisterous family, just fun-loving and open to spending quality time with people. In fact, the surrounding community played a vital role in the lives of the Sherwoods. It was a place of recreation, schooling, and work.

West Medford was not the only section of Medford that was affected by this wonderful couple. James Sherwood Sr.'s role as a teacher at the Roberts Junior High School allowed him to engage a different community. James Sr. began teaching at the predominately white junior high school long before bussing, desegregation, and civil rights became national news. He started his career at the Roberts Junior High during the early 1950s when no one of African descent taught in the city of Medford. Even the superintendent at the time declared that there would be no "Negro" teachers during his time. James Sherwood changed the racial dynamic within Medford's teaching staff by applying and being accepted to teach at the Roberts. Through perseverance and the drive to affect change, James Sherwood contributed greatly to the community. Louise Jordan was able to offer her perspective:

I feel that Jim Sherwood made a tremendous contribution to our city. I admired him for his courage and fortitude in applying as the first Black teacher in an all white teaching community. In spite of the challenges and no doubt bigotry he was confronted with, Jim Sherwood is revered by everyone for being a gentleman, a mentor, and a superb teacher. Thanks to his prowess, he opened the door for all teachers regardless of their ethnic background. What a legacy!

In the midst of this, James Sherwood was able to affect the lives of his students in a very positive way. For his niece, Judi, there have been numerous times when people who have had her uncle as a teacher would show their gratitude and appreciation for his work at the Roberts School. She states, "I would run into people across the city and they would mention my uncle's name and say 'Sherwood, Oh was that you family that taught at the Roberts.' At that time it was predominately

white and he was known as the only black teacher. But the accolades that I get and have always received about him are just amazing.” James Sherwood’s role in the city of Medford as a whole is evidenced by his position at retirement. Upon leaving the realms of teaching, James Sherwood Sr. was second in seniority in the city. His contributions have resulted in a memorial in his name at the library at the Roberts Junior High School.

Being a member of the West Medford community was a unique experience, and each facet of life in the community contributed to its character and welcoming feel. One significant staple in the West Medford community was the Hervey Elementary School. A kindergarten through fifth grade school, the Hervey was often the first step many generations of West Medford children took in their academic lives. The school building was not extraordinary, as most interviewed recalled, but had a presence and atmosphere that was engaging and familial. It was where Ada Sherwood was made a third grade teacher in 1966 after acting as a substitute teacher throughout the city of Medford. Her colleague, Louise Jordan, recalls what it was like to work with Ada:

I remember when Mr. Murphy, our principal, introduced Ada to the staff. Initially I was struck with her beauty and gentle ways. Our classrooms were situated across the hall from one another. We shared the same recess and lunch periods, and soon became dear friends. I was delighted to be apart of her life and she in turn mine. As a child growing up, my contact with other racially diverse people was quite limited so I was most grateful to Ada for broadening my horizons and developing me in a deeper understanding and respect for Black culture.

One of the ways that Ada contributed to the family-like feel of the Hervey School was to incorporate small slices of herself into her everyday work life. From leaving endearing notes in the mailboxes of her colleagues or taking the time to mail high school graduates papers they had written while in Ada's third grade class, she revealed her devotion and commitment to children's learning while also adding to the nurturing atmosphere of the Hervey School. Louise Jordan recalls:

During the early part of my career, I had Denise Furey in my class. Many, many years later... Oh, it had to have been twenty years later... I was talking with Ada and I said to her 'I'd love to know how she is and what she's doing.' She said, 'Don't worry, I'll get her address.' A few days later, she came back to school, gave me her address, told me she had gotten married and was living in Boca Raton, Florida.

The Hervey School extended its role as a community school during the turbulent era of desegregation and bussing. Although there were mixed opinions about ideas of racial balance in the community, the Hervey School was the place that unsatisfied parents sent their children to oppose the bussing of students outside the community and it was the place where an effort was made to address the social issues of the time. During the 1970s, administrators at the Hervey School joined with other educators in Medford to establish a multicultural program aimed at easing the racial tension of the time. Teachers from different backgrounds were paired together and fostered relationships with their classes across the city. Although the tensions of the time were well-known, the Hervey made essential strides in trying to alleviate them.

Another significant part of the community was the West Medford Community Center. Like the Hervey, its influence on the community spanned many generations, and it offered a safe space for community members to work collectively and have fun. Open until nine or ten in the evening and hosting a range of activities, many in West Medford looked forward to attending the Community Center. James Jr. reconstructs what the center was like while he was growing up:

When it was really going good they had a piano upstairs, cooking classes, dance classes, and arts and crafts downstairs. And I can remember indulging in that a little...people doing pottery, making little figures out of clay [...] Sometimes you could walk in and there could be dancing going on or you could walk in and there'd just be someone playing the piano. In the basement also, it was a major hotspot. There was a big pool table down there, a wrestling mat, a Coke machine and a ping pong table. So all that was going on in the community center. We looked forward to going down there.

The Community Center was important not only for youth in West Medford, but also allowed Black youth in Cambridge, Chelsea, Malden and other surrounding communities to mix, mingle and have fun in a safe space. For both James and Ada Sherwood, the Community Center also provided them with additional opportunities to work with children. They took on a major role during the summer months, when they ran summer programs for the neighborhood children at the Center and Dugger Park.

In thinking about the collective contributions of both James and Ada Sherwood, it is evident that their personalities and relationship to community were well suited for their role as educators. They each took a keen interest in the development of their students. For Ada, she

“followed through and always kept track of what they [students] did and how well they did.” For James, he was able to make way for other African Americans willing and able to make a difference in the world of education. Together they contributed to education, to life and to community.

Adalouise Sherwood died in 1989 due to colon cancer. James Sherwood Sr. passed on in 1998 due to complications with his heart. Although their physical selves are no longer apart of this world, their contributions and ways of interacting with the world will be permanent parts of the West Medford community and beyond. This invitation, in essence, becomes the gift of remembrance and recognition. It offers this couple a chance to affect the lives of future generations. Their legacy is best put in the words of those witnessed their lives.

The one thing that set the Sherwoods apart was the fact that they were real pioneers in integrating the teaching staff in the city of Medford. I am most pleased that the School Committee has recognized their contributions and will be naming the Roberts Library in their honor. Ada and Jim were both caring, loving people whose inner beauty permeated everyone they knew and everything they touched. That's a legacy to be proud of! ~Louise Jordan

He [James] had a really dry sense of humor and could really speak spontaneously. So to me that's a gift. He could speak to a crowd at the drop of a hat and hold your interest because he had that dry sense of humor. ~Judith Carrington

“I think they would want to be remembered as loving and kind friends to basically everyone [...]

It basically comes down to love, love of life, love of kids, love of people, relatives and friends.”

~James Sherwood, Jr.