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Alice Coleman '66 rebounds from accident, finds career success

Without a doubt, social work was a career destiny for Alice Smith Coleman.

Never mind that during her years at then-Delaware State College from 1962-1966, the institution had not yet established its social work degree programs.

Never mind that one week before she was due to walk across the DSC Commencement stage to receive her diploma, her life was irrevocably altered in a car accident near the College that left her in a wheelchair for life.

Coleman would go on from that traumatic accident to further her studies and become a wife, a mother of two sons, a lifelong career social worker and a very nice person. Read on for the rest of the story.

Oh yes, and a very nice person.

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Alice Smith Coleman '66 was recently honored by the Delaware Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

?She was always a calm and compassionate person,? said Kenneth Burton, a licensed practical nurse who worked with Coleman throughout most of her 38-year career at the Delaware Psychiatric Center (formerly the Delaware State Hospital). ?She always went above and beyond as a social worker.?

The former Alice Marie Smith?s pictures from the 1966 DSC yearbook reflect a confident student destined for success ? as secretary of the Student Government Association, president of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, a member of the Sociology Club and the editor-in-chief of The Statesman.

Coleman?s aspirations were in social work. However, because DSC would not establish its degree program in social work until the 1980s, she majored in sociology, largely under the instruction of Dr. Maurice Thomasson and his wife LaVerne Thomasson, a longtime teaching team in the department.

She recalled Dr. Thomasson ? who was the department chair ? as a very deliberate, but not loud speaker. She recollected there was a lot of ?meat? in what he said, so it paid for the students to pay attention.

?He didn?t put up with a lot of nonsense,? Coleman said. ?You either knew it or you didn?t.?

Her future seemed exceedingly bright in the spring of 1966, as she was graduating in the top 10 percent of the class. She had dated her future husband Norwood Coleman ?63 since her freshman year and was engaged to marry him, and she had been accepted to graduate school at Atlanta University. All life systems for her appeared to be go.

And then the car accident took place that would challenge all of her promise.

Coleman said she doesn?t remember the accident, which took place on U.S. 13 (now also known as DuPont Highway) less than a mile north of the College. She said that her car turned

over, which resulted in serious injuries made worse by the people who extricated her from the wreck.

?They didn?t immobilize my neck when they took me out of the car,? she said.

Taken initially to Kent General Hospital in Dover, where the emergency medical staff seemed doubtful about her chances for survival, she was transferred to the then-Delaware Division of Wilmington Medical Center, where the medical staff was a bit more hopeful.

?They told me that I would live only about 10 years,? Coleman said.

So as her sister Elizabell Smith (now Massey) walked for her at Commencement, Coleman began her arduous journey to dispel those pessimistic prognostications.

Building a life

In the days and weeks following the accident, Coleman said she was uplifted by the concerns of the DSC community.

?Half the graduating class came to visit me, and so did (DSC President) Dr. Luna Mishoe and his wife,? she said. ?There were so many flowers in my room, it was almost like a funeral.?

At first, Coleman was paralyzed from the neck down. Her then-fiancé Norwood Coleman ? a DSC graduate in music who had joined the Air Force Band and was returning to

Delaware from an assignment in Alaska at the time of the accident ? noted that even in the state of being in traction as the result of her injuries, her natural social work inclinations manifested themselves.

?There just happened to be another DSC student in the same hospital room who had been in a totally different accident (hit by a car) and was extremely emotionally distraught.

Even in the state of being in traction, Alice talked to her and tried to calm her down,? Norwood said. He added that soon thereafter, a Spanish-speaking patient who didn?t speak English was moved into her room, and from her bed Alice assisted the doctor by using her college Spanish to help interpret.

?People didn?t know if she was going to live or die, and here she was giving of herself,? he said.

Eventually some nerve functions began returning in her arms. This helped fuel her desire to overcome her circumstances.

?There was talk of putting me in the Delaware Home and Hospital for the rest of my life,? Alice said. ?I thought then that there was no way I was not going to do anything, because I had worked so hard.?

In considering her options while going through six months of rehabilitation, she knew Atlanta University was out. Its social work department was on a third floor at a time when accessibility for persons with disabilities was not yet a law requirement.

Coleman found out about the University of Illinois, where it had a program in which people in

wheelchairs were accepted. She applied and was invited to come take a test.

?I thought it would be an academic test, but the first thing they asked me to do was to get out of my chair,? Coleman said. ?They wanted to see how long it would take and if I could take care of my physical needs. They explained that they don?t cater to people in a wheelchair.?

She was accepted and completed her Master of Social Work degree in the spring of 1967.

Coleman said she was not only academically fulfilled there. ?I learned more about myself in a wheelchair.?

Meanwhile, Norwood remained a faithful love in her life.

In the weeks following the accident, she told Norwood that there was nothing she could do for him. ?I told him that he might as well go find someone else,? Coleman said. ?But he didn?t.?

The couple was married on March 1, 1969, and went on to produce two sons.

?I had friends who told me that because of her injuries, I shouldn?t marry Alice,? Norwood said. ?But everything that has happened since has confirmed for me that I made the right decision in marrying her. She was able to take care of her responsibilities as a mother, and between us she was the disciplinarian with our sons. She has always been very focused and determined.?

Their oldest, Norwood Jr., would become the third member of the immediate family to graduate from DSU (2006 and 2007), as he followed his mother?s career footsteps by earning bachelor?s and master?s degrees in social work. He is now a clinical supervisor for the Wilmington Child Development Community Policing Program.

Their youngest son, Michael, earned a bachelor?s degree in mechanical engineering from Florida A&M University and is currently continuing his education and working as a mechanical engineering research associate at Florida State University.

Career and community service

One month after her wedding, Coleman began working for the Delaware State Hospital as a psychiatric social worker. Any doubts that she could do the work were effectively dispelled, as she would continue there until her retirement in 2007. As a social worker, she was responsible for three units in the hospital; her work involved doing intake assessments, helping patients with discharge planning, as well as doing individual/family counseling and other patients? services.

She noted that her career advancement was helped by her determination not to use her wheelchair-bound circumstances as an excuse to do only so much, but instead to continually try to see what more she could do. Being grateful for the opportunities she had also helped, she added.

?There have been some challenges, but I just kept trying,? Coleman said. ?If the Lord can bring you to it, He can bring you through it.?

That includes the chronic pain she has had to live with from her injuries. Nevertheless, with the exception of some time off to give birth to her two sons and a couple of operations, she

missed very little time from work during her 38-year tenure with the Delaware State Hospital.

Burton, her work colleague, noted that in working in a mental health facility, Coleman had to often deal with patients who ?acted out,? but she always kept her composure.

?She never took anything personal, and I never heard her raise her voice or make any derogatory comments in response to such challenges,? Burton said.

Coleman?s dedicated service was rewarded in 2004 when she was promoted to director of Social Services, a leadership post she maintained until her retirement.

Even in retirement, she has not stopped her dedication to social work. She now operates her own private counseling service out of her Stanton, Del., home, focusing on families, children and marriage counseling.

?At the State Hospital, I had to work to get people interested in themselves and their treatment,? she said. ?That was different from what I do now, because most of these people (adults) have jobs and they want to deal with their issues.?

Throughout her life, Coleman has also been prolific in community service work. She has served on the state?s Workforce Investment Board, Vocational Rehabilitation Council and the Division of the Visually Impaired Council, as well as a panel member of the Delaware Child Death Review Committee. She is a member of the state Advocates for Persons with Disabilities, a former vice president and board member of the United Way of Delaware, a former vice president and former board member of Goodwill, and has been involved in numerous other community service endeavors.

She is a member and past president of the Delaware Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, which recently honored her with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Among her other numerous honors is her induction into the Hall of Fame of Delaware Women (2000) and the Living Legacy Award from the Delaware Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women (2011).

Looking back, she is glad she didn?t take the easy road after her injuries.

?I could have just gone home and my mother and sister would have taken care of me,? Coleman said. ?I think people don?t know that no matter what you do, it is only a fraction of what you can do.?

-- *Story and photo by Carlos Holmes*

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