

Mary Edmond

Born: June 14, 1937

Death:

Mary Edmond was born in Newport, TN, and named after her paternal grandmother. She had four siblings. Her father, who died when Mary was only eight years old, was named Percival Wade Dykes, and her mother was Nannie Mae (Miller) Dykes. “My father and my mother believed that I could do anything, and that opinion of me has helped me to cross every hurdle I had or thought I had in life,” said Mary. “They set up expectations. If someone expects you to be OK and [tells] you you’re capable, you just do it.”

Mary had her own expectations and faced many hurdles to achieve them. First, shortly after moving to Grand Rapids, MI, in 1960, she applied for a teacher’s job “on a bet.” At that time she was working as a waitress at the Chicken Shack on South Division. According to Mary, the conversation went like this: “Blacks couldn’t be hired to teaching jobs in Grand Rapids.” She continued, “Grand Rapids had so few black teachers that I always like to tell the story that [my husband and I] became numbers 37 and 38 out of 1,300. That’s how bad the situation was.” Moreover, according to Mary, those 37 teachers who were hired in a 2 – 3 year span were segregated in schools with only black students. And “if there weren’t enough positions [in those schools], they put you out of your field.”

Both Mary and her husband, Leroy Roscoe Edmonds, were assigned out of their fields. Mary was placed in a third grade classroom, instead of music, which she had minored in at Knoxville College (Class of 1957), and Leroy was assigned a sixth grade classroom, instead of physical education, which was his major at Knoxville College (Class of 1958). What upset them even more was the requirement to go back to school every summer in order to qualify to teach in another field, especially when they were already qualified to teach in a field. “I felt thwarted . . . so I went back to the Board of Education after [only] one summer of classes in which both my husband and I thought that we had studied under the most racist instructors we had ever met. Whatever we did was not accepted as quality. . . . I’m an English major, so I was actually . . . helping my husband with his papers. The guy would only give him Ds. I would get a C or C+ on my papers. These were graduate courses, so you can’t do anything with grades like that,” Mary said.

When Mary went back to the Board of Education, she successfully pleaded her case and was placed in her field to teach music. She became the first black person to teach music in Grand Rapids Public Schools. Thus, in 1961, her long career in teaching and administrating began at South High School at the corner of Jefferson Ave. and Hall St. “[At first] it was really strange,” said Mary. “My colleagues . . . saw the students all look at [me] in awe—the people who had not dealt with or experienced having someone black in the professional field.” At that time there were only 5 blacks out of 93 teachers. “I didn’t have any overt problems [with my white colleagues]. I wasn’t really questioned . . . as a person. [But] what blacks [in general] were capable of doing was always a topic of conversation [in the teacher’s lounge]. At that time,

according to Mary, the lower grades at South High School were “turning decisively black,” but [she] got along well with students. “I like to think that my presence at South made a difference, not only in South, but [also] in Grand Rapids. I feel that those of us who came early, the future of other blacks who came to teach in Grand Rapids rested upon our shoulders.”

In 1960, Mary and her husband came from Mississippi, where they had taught for a year, to Grand Rapids to visit Leroy’s father. They had come only to show off their first-born daughter, Chana Yvette, a year old at that time, but they decided to stay. In the 1940s, Mary’s father-in-law, Roscoe Edmonds, had migrated from the South to Grand Rapids to work at a General Motors plant. He also volunteered in the Community Action Program, which helped black immigrants assimilate into the community.

As the couple had more children, Mary had more discriminatory hurdles to cross in her job. “According to the rules, [being pregnant] was a no-no. . . . When I told my administrator, she was reluctant to let me go. Nothing got said about it. At the school where I was when it got time for me to go to the hospital and have my kid, I had to resign. That was the rule, so I had to actually sign the papers to resign from my position. However, my position was arranged for me, and I went right back to the very same position. . . . So I feel really fortunate and really blessed. I had wonderful women who were my principals,” said Mary. Mary had two more children—Deidra Rachelle and Ivan Alexander.

When she had her third child, Mary’s mother came to live with them. Her mother had had a mild stroke, and the family wished for her to no longer live alone. The arrangement was beneficial for both Mary and her mother. At that time, South High School had become a middle school, and Mary had been appointed assistant principal for curriculum and instruction. She was also working on a master’s degree in Teaching the Disadvantaged at Western Michigan University. “I was only able to do all those things because my mom was there. My kids were well taken care of. I didn’t have to worry about them,” said Mary. “I imagine I would have been able to do [those things anyway] because my husband [was] very supportive, but it would have been twice as difficult.”

Yet, at her work place Mary was less supported. To obtain the promotion to assistant principal, she had another kind of discrimination to face and overcome. Before she was assigned as the “assistant principal” at South Middle School, the administration had “tried to call [her] an “administrative assistant.” “I simple told them that I wasn’t looking for a job. . . . And I wouldn’t consider taking it for less than the other males were being paid,” recalled Mary. Thus, with her self-confidence and assertive nature, Mary—after going all the way to the top and talking with the superintendent—became the first black woman in Grand Rapids secondary schools to have an administrative position equivalent to the males’ in both title and pay.

When asked how she happened to have the self-assurance to stand up to such institutionalized inequity, Mary said, “I grew up with a super self-concept, so I thought that there wasn’t much that I couldn’t do. It may not be as well done as someone else’s, but I could try.” Thus, she was a lifelong advocate for not only herself, but also students or others whom she thought were being treated unfairly. “I’m not a person who has an excuse for anything. I’m always conscious of some of the differences—no excuses for being black. I don’t blame anybody. What I do is push

and advocate. . . . Either I can do this or we can do it together. It was the way that I was socialized in that little small segregated environment that I lived in,” concluded Mary.

In 1973, Mary became the director of multicultural education and gender equity for the Grand Rapids school district. Because of her work as assistant principal and as director of the summer school program, Mary believed that she “was tapped for [that] particular position.” She mainly made sure that “blacks were included in the life of the school.” She would go around and grab them, “saying you can; you can; you can.” She would also “put on programs and [see] that there were activities [in which blacks] were included.

After 7 years, the school district lost the grant that supported the multicultural education and gender equity program. So Mary’s title changed. She insisted on retaining the title of director of multicultural education, but she also became the supervisor of foreign languages. “My position always went against the grain of everybody. [I would walk] into a room, and they would be talking about new curriculum . . . and then they’d say, ‘There she is’ . . . because I always asked the question, you’re structuring the program and you’re putting it together, but what about these kids, or what about this population? To me, we must do everything we can to get [kids] off the fringe,” concluded Mary.

In 1976, as a result of a Grand Rapids Public Schools’ mural project in which Grand Rapids African American history was going to be a part, Mary discovered that the teachers knew very little about that subject. When she went to the Grand Rapids Public Library to research local African American history, Mary found that there was very little available. She said that was her “first entrée to seriously beginning to look at what was available about blacks in Grand Rapids. . . . I began to delve into local history. That [curiosity went] back to where I lived. [My first school teacher, Miss May] . . . knew about all the black people that had lived in that little small town. . . . None of that was happening in Grand Rapids for African Americans. Lots of the black people . . . would say that blacks hadn’t done anything in Grand Rapids.” In addition to her own research, Mary hired a consultant to do more.

With more information about local African American history, Mary began to promote programs during February, the annual Black History Month. “I wrote the resolution, and the Board [of Education] declared Black History Month and encouraged all the teachers in all the schools to do activities that would be appropriate,” said Mary.

Mary also wrote a grant for her sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, and “discovered . . . a lot of tidbits of information about life in Grand Rapids, but we had little pictorial evidence. We hired a photographer to go around the community, and I asked people to dig back through their stuff. . . . We went around and collected a lot of photo evidence that Grand Rapids [Public Library] did not have in [its] collection.” From her research, Gordon Olson, former city historian, and Mary created an exhibit, “150 years of African American Presence in Grand Rapids.” It was portable, and Mary used it for presentations at schools and other places around the state.

In 1978, because her church, St. Luke AME Zion, “was a minor part of the underground railroad” in Michigan, Mary began to research that hidden system of freedom used by runaway slaves in the 1800s. At the time of this interview, Mary was one of the founders of the Michigan

Underground Railroad Council, which was only 6 months old. Since 1995, she had been the president of the Michigan Black History Network.

Ten years earlier, in 1985, Mary had accepted an invitation to be on the Japanese Sister Cities Committee, which was part of the “State Department.” She was instrumental in helping Grand Rapids adopt a Japanese sister city. Then the International Racist Commission developed, and Mary was the first vice president of that group. Mary’s involvement “set the stage for three sister cities that Grand Rapids [adopted].” In 2000, Mary said, “That’s been a major portion of my life for the last 15 years. I just finished as treasurer, and now I’m back for the second time as vice president.”

In 2000, Mary was also hired by the State of Michigan to put everything she knew about the Underground Railroad into one document. About that project, she said, “It’s not just to do something myself but to excite and ignite others to do the same thing.” Also, at the time of this interview, Mary was working on a teachers’ manual for a training program in multicultural education. It was called *Equity: Connecting with the Learner*. The manual was a culmination of a 4 year project in which a group of educators around the state each wrote a chapter for the book. The project was funded by the federal government and administered by the Michigan Department of Education and North Central Regional Laboratories. Mary co-wrote a chapter entitled *Partnering with Families and Communities*. “In my studies and the work I have done, I’ve shown the importance of involved families [in the education of their children],” said Mary.

In addition to those projects, Mary mentioned briefly her involvement in something called “Reflections Unlimited.” She described it as a “self-taught, full-service, cultural diversity program.” She also said, “We . . . partner with people in order to get just about anything done that addresses the issues of diversity—[studies, training, programs, or publications].”

Over her long and distinguished career, Mary received some recognition. In 1985, she represented the United States as a Fulbright Scholar to West Africa. In 1988, she was awarded the Albert Baxter History Award by the Grand Rapids Historical Society. Furthermore, she was asked by the National Park Service to be a member of its Strategic Planning Committee, which made decisions about 1997 federal legislation and the money that supports it.

Finally, about her career and the rewards that have come from it, Mary said, “I think the important thing for me is the fact I can effect change on all levels—local, state, national, and international.”

Other Resources: