



A 'Real Good' Story

The R.G. and Onnie Bouchum Scholarship

By LJ Evans

On an ordinary day in 1997, Dorothy Jones sat in her office on the third floor of Signers' Hall and checked her e-mail, but one of the messages waiting for her was anything but ordinary. It was the first letter she had ever received from her 77-year-old father, R.G. Bouchum, who was just learning how to read and write.

"I came unglued. I cried and cried," Jones said. "It was a shock to get my very first written communication from him ever, and it was an e-mail, of all things."

Jones, who was serving the chancellor as assistant for equal opportunity at the time, had counseled her father to stay busy after her mother died in 1991.

"He was lonesome. He had nothing to do ... so I said, 'Go back to school,'" Jones said.

A woman for whom R.G. did yard work in his hometown of Longview, Texas, recommended the East Texas Literacy Council. It was his tutor there who had him first write out in longhand the message he wanted to send his daughter in Alaska, then type it on the computer keyboard.

"It was a simple message, really, just a couple of lines," Jones said. "And at the end of the message the tutor wrote, 'R.G. did this all by himself!'"

Jones said he told her later that when he put his hands on the keyboard the first

key he hit was a P. He held it down, not anticipating the effect that would have, until there was a whole string of P's.

"He got all upset because he thought he broke it. He told me he'd 'P'd' all over it!"

The value of education

R.G. Bouchum (he always said it stood for "Real Good") grew up on a sharecropper's farm in Texas as one of nine children. His father made sure all the girls got college educations because he didn't want them to be dependent, but he figured the boys could always find work. R.G. made it to the fifth grade before he had to quit school to work in the fields. He learned the alphabet but couldn't quite string it all together to actually read. After he married Onnie V. Miles in 1943, she handled any business that required the ability to read and write.

R.G. and Onnie understood the value of education, and they were determined that their children would have a better life. For many years they worked long hours

UAF alumna featured in this story: Dorothy Jones, '77

at extra jobs to make it possible for their daughters, Bobbie J. and Dorothy, to go to college. R.G. was always eager to tell anyone who would listen about his daughters, especially Dorothy, who became an associate professor at UAF teaching computer applications.

It was to honor her parents' high regard for education that Dorothy and her husband, Lloyd, decided in 1997 to establish the R.G.

and Onnie V. Bouchum Multicultural Scholarship at UAF. The scholarship was first awarded in 2000.

Last year's scholarship went to Unika Nelson, a junior communication major. (See sidebar below.)

UAF Summer Sessions director Michelle Bartlett said the Bouchum scholarship is a reflection of her good friend Dorothy's relationship with both of her parents.

"From her parents she got the values of hard work and a good education," Bartlett said. "This scholarship is a wonderful way that she has honored her parents. It's not

only about what they gave her but also what she's done with it."

A truck driver who couldn't read

For many years R.G. supported his family as a truck driver — a challenge for someone who couldn't read, but he developed strategies to compensate.

When he needed help, he stopped and asked for directions.

If someone was with him who could read, that person helped him decipher the paperwork that said what should

be delivered where, and he had the warehouse workers load the truck in such a way that he could tell where things needed to be delivered.

But when his beloved Onnie died, he could no longer handle his personal affairs, so he took Dorothy's suggestion and decided to learn how to read. He had always been a hard worker, and he approached acquiring these new skills with the same determination. His stories so impressed Brenda Brown, a staff member and one of his tutors at the East Texas Literacy Council, that she helped him compile his memoirs into a book, *One Man, One Book*.

"With each lesson I found that I learned as much or more from him than he could ever learn from me," Brown writes in the book's introduction.

In the book's first story, "Life on the Newsome Farm," R.G. tells about growing up in East Texas.

When we were living on the Newsome Farm out in Ore City, Daddy was sharecropping — working on the halves. If he made two bales of cotton, the boss man got one and Daddy got one. That was the usual arrangement for sharecroppers.

For extra money, the kids gathered the eggs and Mama would take them to town ... and sell them. She would pack them in a bucket or box lined with cotton seed. She would put a layer of cotton seed in the bottom and then some eggs, layering them all the way to the top.

Most folks don't know about cotton seed, but my mother sure did. Cotton seed is not so soft, but the seed always had cotton stuck to it and made a nice sized, soft ball about the size of your little fingernail. A lot of cotton seed was perfect for lining the bucket Mama used to take eggs to town.

You're never
too old to
learn.



R.G. Bouchum keeps an eye on a throng of Fairbanks Community Food Bank volunteers from his wheelchair in this 2001 painting by Charlen Jeffery Satrom.

A home at the food bank

In 1998, after R.G. had a stroke and could no longer stay alone at his home in Texas, Dorothy and Lloyd persuaded him to come live with them in Fairbanks. Not able to sit still very long, he was soon volunteering with Foster Grandparents and participating in many activities at the Fairbanks Resource Agency's Senior Center. One of the volunteer jobs he took up with a passion was at the Fairbanks Community Food Bank.

The staff there quickly figured out that R.G. had some very special gifts.

"His job looked like it was just repackaging rice and flour," said Samantha Kirstein, the food bank's executive director. In reality, she says, his job was to share stories about his life and his strong work ethic with young people who were in need of some attitude adjustment.

The courts or the school district sometimes send young first offenders to perform community service in lieu of jail time or detention. One of the places they can put in their hours is at the food bank.

Bouchum lived in Fairbanks with his daughter Dorothy Jones and her family from 1998 until his death in 2007.

"We connected them with R.G. and he told them great stories," Kirstein said. "It wasn't easy growing up a black man in Texas during the time of segregation, but even with all the challenges he'd met in his life, even though he was wheelchair-bound, he was still working."

"If he couldn't get their attention any other way he'd take off his socks and show them his stump," Kirstein said.

That stump was a harsh reminder of R.G.'s first winter in Fairbanks. Despite urging from Dorothy and Lloyd to come indoors after a big snowfall, he kept shoveling their driveway and ended up with frostbite, which cost him his leg because of circulation problems. But even the amputation didn't keep him from helping out with chores and volunteering at the food bank, Dorothy said.

Because Bouchum couldn't read throughout most of his life, Kirstein notes that all the challenges he faced were compounded.



Photo courtesy of Dorothy Jones

"He was illiterate not because of his brain power — he was one of the smartest people we ever had around — but because he didn't have the opportunity."

"Everything he had to share with us was very worthwhile," Kirstein said.

R.G. was flattered by the scholarship his daughter set up in his and Onnie's name, and he met the scholarship recipient each year until his death in November 2007 at age 90. Although his e-mails have ended, R.G. Bouchum's extraordinary accomplishment at age 77 embodies his philosophy: you're never too old to learn.



LJ Evans is a writer and editor for UAF Marketing and Communications.

Unika L. Nelson

"I love understanding how people interact with each other in different situations. There's no right or wrong approach," says Unika L. Nelson, a communication major and the 2007 recipient of the R.G. and Onnie V. Bouchum Multicultural Scholarship. She was planning to major in music, but switched because she loved her first-semester communication class so much.

Originally from Detroit, Mich., Nelson has lived all over because her dad is in the Coast Guard. She graduated from Kodiak High School in 2004 and attended her first semester at Kodiak College, then transferred to UAF in spring 2005. She is thinking about pursuing a career as a college admissions diversity director.

"I think that's really important. There are so many different types of people, not even just talking about race, but culture, ethnicity. Not everyone learns the same, communicates the same, thinks the same. It's so important that people are aware of that."



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