

Forrest, advocate for education, dies at 97

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James Alexander Forrest Sr., who throughout his life worked to improve education for African-Americans and others in St. Mary's County, died Tuesday morning at age 97.

He served on the St. Mary's County Board of Education for a decade, and the county's career and technology center bears his name.

Born April 15, 1911, Forrest started school at St. Peter Claver, a Catholic school in St. Inigoes, and later attended nearby Cardinal Gibbons Institute, the only high school in St. Mary's County for black students in the early 1930s. There he learned not only about agriculture but also about science, history, philosophy, the arts and other subjects.

In an excerpted interview from the book, "In Relentless Pursuit of an Education," published by the Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions, Forrest recalled learning about African-Americans in history who had excelled.

"It was so important. And I don't know, I think maybe sometimes we — some of us have lost that desire to be informed of certain activities that we made progress in. See, we've done a lot of things that've not been recorded — a lot of inventions," Forrest said. "And I think we need to know that and that gives you a pride in your race. Look, there's a man just like you, same color, same features and everything, and look what he's done; he's made progress in life."

James and his wife, Harriett Swales Forrest, were members of the United Parent Trustee Association, a group formed in the 1920s to help improve public education to African-Americans in St. Mary's County. The group's efforts led to the 1930s opening of the Banneker School, the first public high school in the county for black students.

Forrest was awarded a doctorate of humane letters from St. Mary's College of Maryland in 2000.

"He believed education presented the best future for the youth and the country," said his daughter-in-law, Margaret Forrest of Leonardtown. "He was just a very community-oriented person. Family and community were his primary concerns."

Forrest worked for C&P Telephone for four decades, retiring in 1976. He made inroads as an African-American supervisor. He was also the first black member of the St. Mary's County Fair Board and served as a bailiff at St. Mary's circuit court.

"He was the consummate gentleman," said Judge Marvin Kaminetz. "He was very good with people" and handled his job with calmness and courteousness, the judge said.

Forrest was among the 250,000 people standing at the Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1963 when Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech.

Forrest played a central role in the desegregation of St. Mary's public schools in the 1960s.

"It was a tough struggle to end segregation, and it may be hard for some people to understand the difficulties we went through to make that condition a reality. Sometimes I still ask why prejudice is so prevalent. I think, 'I haven't done one thing to you, but you still hate me because I'm different,'" Forrest said in a 2004 interview done for SMECO's Southern Maryland Stories series. "All of us who were part of that struggle have come through it pretty lucky. We have our scars but they heal quickly. I believe we're able to understand change better because we're able to deal with certain situations, and better understand the other fellow's point of view."

Forrest was appointed to the St. Mary's County Board of Education in 1973 by then-Gov. Marvin Mandel. He served 10 years on the school board, a time that saw the opening of several new schools.

The school system named the county's career center the Dr. James A. Forrest Career and Technology Center several years ago after a major renovation of the Leonardtown facility.

"You really need education to make your way in life. You can be lost without it," Forrest said in the 2004 interview. "The difference between a farmer who can read and write and a farmer who can't is that after plowing, the first farmer can pick up the newspaper and understand the world better."

"He was very outgoing and highly respected," recalled his friend and colleague Philip Scriber. "A gentleman wherever you saw him ... He was just one of a kind that everybody loved."

Forrest and his wife would have celebrated their 74th anniversary this June.

They had five children: George, former St. Mary's County administrator; Lewis, an author and educator; Barbara, a retired educator; Francis, a dental laboratory owner; and James Jr., deceased. The couple also had nine grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

"He lived a long and fruitful life. He showed us how to live and he showed us how to die with dignity," said George Forrest. "He was a role model; he set the examples and had great expectations for us ... He was a great man."

Visitation for Forrest will be held at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church on Sunday, March 29, from 2 to 6 p.m. A Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated Monday, March 30, at 10:30 a.m., followed by cemetery services.

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