

Community mourns loss of icon



FILE PHOTO

William Fields shows a trimmed limb of the Crying Tree to Marion Mayor David Helms. Fields reflected on all the white oak has endured and witnessed during its long life.

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS

Staff

William Fields often quoted his mother, saying, "Outta sight don't mean out of mind and heart." This community lost Fields to COVID-19 Tuesday, but the educator, artist, and advocate for hope will long remain in countless minds and hearts.

As news of his death was shared so were the stories of how he touched lives.

Announcing his passing on Facebook Wednesday morning, his daughter, Monica Lattany, said her dad was "celebrating his 70th birthday in heaven."

When Fields was born in Greevers Clinic in Chilhowie, the doctor told

There's More

To learn more about Mt. Pleasant and Sallie's Crying Tree, watch these Project Southwest Virginia videos.

<https://youtu.be/JDhnuDcr2FY>
(Mount Pleasant)

<https://youtu.be/VQ9SvSwq2og>
(Sallie's Crying Tree)

his parents that he likely wouldn't live through the night. In a column he penned for the News & Messenger in 2016, Fields reflected, "By the grace of God, some 65 years and "one day at a time" later, I'm still here."

Rarely did anyone encounter Fields

Fields

From Page A1

without hearing his mantra “one day at a time.” He often used the phrase in respect to the challenges of this life.

The Artist

As a Black man who had attended the segregated Carnegie School, could remember not being allowed to swim at Hungry Mother State Park because of his skin color, and lived through the Civil Rights era, Fields knew the strug-

gles of racism and discrimination firsthand. As a young man, he acknowledged experiencing humiliation and anger until he listened to a still small voice within himself telling him that he was too busy trying to be a Black artist as opposed to being a man God created to be a “Black man in America who he’d blessed with a certain measure of talent to portray life from a Black perspective, that has the ability to speak to the spirit of all mankind, that would take the time to stop, look and listen to that still small voice.”

Fields love of art be-

gan early at the Carnegie School in Marion, where his teachers Miss Evelyn Thompson and Miss Rosalie Smith encouraged his drawing. In 2018, he recalled that once a year the Carnegie students would unite with white students for a festival that celebrated music and other creative endeavors. Fields contributed a crayon depiction of a Pony Express Station.

Fields went on to attend the Virginia Art Institute in Charlottesville. Over time his interest flourished

See **FIELDS**, Page A3

Fields

From Page A2

to include photography and leatherwork through his company Dear Valley Leather.

His painting won him acclaim.

His original 3-foot x 4-foot acrylic painting "In the Key of Blue" was seen internationally on the cover of The Crooked Road's Mountains of Music Homecoming guide for 2018.

Fields was chosen to create the cover artwork by Jack Hinshelwood, then executive director of The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail. Hinshelwood said that he had admired Fields' artwork, which includes leatherwork and photos, since he first saw it hanging at Heartwood in Abingdon.

"His style is unmistakable," said Hinshelwood.

Yet, there was a time when Fields didn't paint.

Fellow artist Anne Hull "first met William more than 10 years ago. He had wandered into the Appalachian Spirit Gallery to 'see what we were all about.'"

Hull listened as Fields and artist Ned Johnson talked.

"Ned knew how talented William was and what a wonderful artist and leatherworker he was," Hull remembered. "William indicated that with family and work obligations, he had not created anything in a long time. I listened as Ned took William to task a bit, indicating that while God had given him a great family and a good job to sustain that family, but God had also given him creative talents that others did not have and that he should not neglect the natural abilities that God had chosen to bestow especially to him. William took Ned's words to heart and immediately began painting."

The gallery, Hull said, "proudly displayed his work." From time to time, she acknowledged that his fellow artists would nudge him onward.

"When I looked at William's work," Hull said, "I knew in my heart and head that his talent was something beyond extraordinary, something that was 'pure' and 'raw'."

Another of Fields' paintings was on Dr. Scott Sikes' mind this week.

The director of Emory & Henry's Appalachian Center for Civic Life, which has worked with Fields to preserve Southwest Virginia's Black history, told of the last time he saw Fields.

"He brought a painting to show me that he had just finished. The painting was inspired by a picture of him holding his son as a baby and the idea had been sitting with him for nearly 30 years. Mr. Fields told me that if the Lord took him tomorrow, he could go happy because



FILE PHOTO

William Fields retired from Blue Ridge Job Corps after 31 years of service. Often, his camera seemed like an extension of his body.

he had finished that painting. I have been thinking about his words all day. I have also thought about the pride in his voice and the love on his face when he talked about his family during that conversation. He especially loved to tell me stories of his grandchildren. I know they will miss him deeply."

Family Man

Hull, who described Fields as a "treasure," also noted his devotion to his family. "And most importantly, I treasured the man who so fiercely loved and sacrificed for his family -- the family about whom he spoke so frequently and proudly."

Diane Hayes, who knew Fields since he was a child, told of accompanying him and his two grandchildren to Glade Spring last fall to search for arrowheads. She reflected that he was so patient with the youngsters and such a good teacher. When one of them found an arrowhead, Fields pointed out that he may well have been the first person to handle the artifact since it was used on a hunt.

As much as he spoke of his family of today -- wife, Reesa, son, William Ammi, and daughter, Monica, and his grandchildren, Fields also remembered those who went before him, most especially his parents, Mattie and George Claiborne Fields.

His mother, who worked in others' homes cleaning and caring for children and operating the Smyth County Cannery, left a profound impression on Fields. He described her as "a phenomenal woman who was ahead of her time in many ways, especially when it came to providing for her family."

Throughout this lifetime, Fields went on to help many young women blossom.

Educator

For 31 years, he helped educate the women who attended Blue Ridge Job Corps in Marion.

His career there began in 1984 when he went to work as a substitute arts & crafts teacher. He would go on to serve as a resident adviser and then student government adviser. He encouraged the students to get involved in community service and learn about government. From field trips to Washington, D.C., to taking part in Marion events, Mayor David Helms remembered Wednesday that Fields was always with the students. He had a "great influence on those young people," Helms said. "There's no way to measure the lives he touched."

Hull reflected, "I treasured the fact that he shepherded and taught so many women at the Job Corps through their tenure there."

Even after retirement, Fields didn't stop educating.

As E&H students helped preserve local Black history, Fields helped teach them about it.

E&H's Sikes said, "Our whole community has lost a unique and skilled artist, a teller of stories, a keeper of memories, a humble servant, and, most important, a teacher to all of us. He leaves an absence that cannot be filled. With all of our students, he was generous and kind and gracious and willing to listen to them. I am honored to have known him and call him a friend."

Jeff Robinson, a teacher and coach at Chilhowie High School, shared how Fields worked with him and students just last year.

Robinson had known Fields since Ammi and Monica were students, but, he said, "it was not until this past spring that I really got to know the man."

At the request of the town of Chilhowie, Robinson, a

history teacher, and two of his students, Mari-Beth Boardwine and Keyleigh Paschal, undertook the research to enter a Virginia contest for a historical marker honoring the Rev. George Washington Lomans, the son of a freed slave who established and pastored First Baptist Church on the banks of the Holston River and founded Lomans Brother's Store, which became the focal point of life beside the tracks of the Norfolk + Western Railroad."

When Robinson shared the final copy for the marker that he and his students proposed, Fields said in an email that it brought tears to eyes and asked Robinson to tell the students, "Please let both of these Young Ladies know how much I appreciate each of them and am 'Blessed that the Lord brought us All together!'"

Keeper of History

A story Fields felt compelled to share was that of the Crying Tree in Marion.

He suspected that he's stood under Sallie's Crying Tree more than any other modern-day individual. He's told her story over and over, taking students, visitors, and leaders to stand under the white oak as he shared how Sallie, a child slave who was separated from her family when her parents were sold in the 1840s, would pour out her heartbreak to the tree.

Sallie was a grandmother of the late Evelyn Thompson Lawrence, an educator and historian who first came to know Fields when he entered her classroom as a first-grader. Their student-teacher relationship transformed over the years into friendship. She came to regard Fields as her adopted son. She shared her longtime dream of converting her former church, Mt. Pleasant, into a museum to preserve this community's African-American history with him. Knowing her years were running out, she ultimately placed the mantle of preserving that history on the shoulders of Fields, Hayes, and Margaret Edwards.

Thursday, Hayes reflected about how important Fields' willingness to tell that story as well as that of the museum to groups and individuals was to Mount Pleasant's development.

Fields often served as the Mount Pleasant Preservation Society Museum's public face.

Though, she also nicknamed him "Rev. Willie." Hayes explained that Fields' spiritual nature would often show through as he spoke and people would often come by the former church asking, "Is that minister here?"

In June, segments of PBS' Project Southwest premiered on YouTube telling about the Crying Tree and

Fields

From Page A3

Mt. Pleasant. Hayes and Fields shared the stories with a new and ever-growing audience.

Hull noted that his work in carrying that history forward was another way Fields was a treasure. She said, "I treasured the fact that he took on the huge task of preserving the legacy of the Mount Pleasant Museum and continuing Evelyn Lawrence's vision."

Helms recounted how this past Memorial Day weekend Fields shared the Crying Tree's story with a family visiting from New Jersey. The mayor reflected that Fields had the ability to "show up at the right time at the right place."

A Friend

Fields cared about people – those he saw frequently and those who were strangers.

At one point when she lived out of town, Hayes suffered homesickness. In a phone call with Fields, he promised to send her something to help. A few days later, a CD holding photos from a Carnegie reunion arrived and brought tears and love to her.

Dan Kegley, a longtime friend of Fields, said, "William and I connected first over mutual interests in photography, walking cornfields looking for arrowheads, then bonded in many shared conversations. We stood for a half hour one night at the Food City gas pumps after filling up, just chatting and enjoying each other's company. More than any memory of him, I cherish this one most: he was my first guest at Sara's and my new home a dozen years ago. I could not yet even offer him a chair, much less a porch to sit on. We had only the cinderblocks just delivered to form the foundation. But a pair of easy chairs would not have made that afternoon any better."

Hayes noted that she's gotten calls from all over the country expressing condolences.

From friend to community leader, Fields will be missed.

Tal Stanley of E&H's Appalachian Center for Civic Life, noted that he spent much of Wednesday "talking individually with students, many students, who thought of Mr. Fields as mentor, teacher, and friend."

As Hull said, "We have indeed lost a treasure."

Perhaps, the only way through the grief will be to live as Fields always commended: One day a time.