

LIFE'S LESSONS BECOME WAYNE WOMAN'S MESSAGE

Being inclusive benefits everyone

By **JIM MILLER**
FINGER LAKES TIMES

When she was a fifth-grader at a segregated Florida school, Patricia Ann Black Bigham watched one day as a classmate opened his history textbook. Inside the front cover was a stamp identifying the book's origin. North Rose: Bigham's other home.

The daughter of migrant workers, Bigham grew up spending part of the year in Sanford, Fla., and part of the year in Wayne County. From her experiences as a migrant

and as an African-American in the segregated South, she learned that including everyone in the community benefits everyone in the community — and that's a message she wants to share.

"I would like people to see the migrants as human beings, as part of the community," she said. "We would have a better community. We would have a bigger community."

Bigham, who lives in Wolcott and runs Patricia Ann's Nail

Spa and Unique Boutique, will speak at 7 p.m. Feb. 17 at the Wayne County Museum in Lyons. She is also writing a book about her life.

"[In] any story, you can find universal elements ...," museum Director Joe O'Toole said. "There are many people here who have roots in the migrant community. Reaching out through her story and letting them know you are part of the community, it's a bridge-building experience."

Bigham's father, Pilgrim Black, led a crew of migrants north each summer to work on the VanDusen farm on Pre-Emption Road in Huron. And Bigham, who was born in Lyons in 1956, spent each summer at the farm with her family. They exchanged a comfortable home in Sanford for a farmhouse that had no running water or indoor plumbing. The other migrants, who worked for Bigham's father, lived in one of the seven spartan cabins that surrounded the main house. They had stoves and electricity — a single overhead bulb — but like the main farmhouse they lacked plumbing.

Other families had it worse. In 1967, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy toured Huron to see the squalid conditions in which some migrants lived.

But Bigham said she enjoyed life in



Bigham



Migrant worker Pilgrim Black was about 16 when this photo (left) was taken at his family home in Sanford, Fla. The smaller photo of his daughter, Patricia Ann, now of Wolcott, was made when she was in third grade.

LESSONS

Migrant battled and beat a cocaine addiction, started a family, developed a deep commitment to God and settled in Wolcott

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the migrant camp, although it also struck her as being "so plantation-like."

Most of the migrant children worked in the fields, picking fruit alongside their parents, Bigham said. They were required to attend school only two days a week.

But Bigham's father — who himself had only a fifth-grade education — sent his daughter to school full-time in the integrated North Rose school district, and she never had to work on the farm.

When the family returned to Florida after the harvest, Bigham returned to a segregated school, where the teachers often went over material she'd already learned in Wayne County. The textbooks — including the history book that coincidentally came from North Rose — were all second-hand.

"It brought me down that as a black person, I had to live a lesser life," Bigham said.

Seeing the used history book that day in fifth grade didn't just give her the feeling of being left out, she

said. It gave her the knowledge that she was.

"It does take a big toll on a child, going back and forth," she said. "In the North, my life was white. In the South, my life was black."

A migrant's daughter

Bigham speaks with pride of her father, who died four years ago at the age of 97.

Pilgrim Black began work at 11 and kept going into his 80s, building a business managing a crew of migrant workers.

"This was employment to them," she said. "It was a way of life."

They came to the same farm each July, traveling by bus and car, and they worked through the fall, picking apples, cherries, pears and plums. Bigham said the community welcomed her family and the other workers, but she felt a sense of separateness all the same.

In those days, programs to help the migrants didn't exist, and the workers were largely left to fend for themselves. Most were African-American, and Bigham believes they would

have been helped more had they been white.

Conditions have improved since Bigham's childhood. More help is available to the thousands of migrants who come to Wayne County each year, and Bigham said their housing is generally far better than when she was growing up.

But she believes the difficulty she experienced — the perception of migrants as anonymous rather than individual people — still lingers.

She points to a recent newspaper photo spread, which showed the pictures of numerous Latin-American migrants at work but did not give any of their names.

"It doesn't matter which race it is," she said. "The point is that they're still being left out."

People don't often think of all the work that migrants put into getting fruit to the grocery store for people to buy, she said.

"I think that they should be celebrated for that," she said. "I would like to see our area make them more comfortable."

Bigham ultimately found

herself at home in Wayne County, and she wishes that others could, too. She lives not far from the old Van-Dusen farm. The house and cabins still stand, and she drives by them often.

"Every time I pass by it — every time ... I begin to feel [nostalgic] for at least the next mile," she said. "It feels like I'm going through home. In every sense of the word it was home, even though all of the terrible things happened."

Seven acres and a mule

When she was 8, one of her father's employees began sexually abusing her both in Florida and in Wayne County, Bigham said, and it went on for years.

"This was one of my father's trusted field hands," she said. "He had known me all of my life."

She decided then that she would someday write a book about her experiences.

In the following years, she battled and beat a cocaine addiction, started a family, developed a deep commitment to God and settled permanently in Wol-

cott. And she started telling friends about her book. She wanted them to remind her to start writing, to pressure her into fulfilling her long-held dream, she said.

Ten years ago, she began writing, and she hopes to finish by May or June.

"It's just always been my destiny to write it," she said.

Bigham calls her project "Seven Acres and a Mule." The first part of the title refers to the amount of land she and her "life-mate" Bill Bigham own in Wolcott.

"And the mule could be my life-mate or the big dog I've got here in the house," she joked.

Lately, O'Toole has been helping her with her writing.

The two met when Bigham sought advice on preserving some old family letters, and she started telling him about her life, O'Toole said. Bigham ultimately donated her father's business records to the museum.

"A lot of times minorities are left out of the historical record," O'Toole said. "And it's invaluable for us that we have first-person

accounts of our local history from these groups that a historically excluded ... really a first step toward making a more complete history of our county."

O'Toole said he is eager to read Bigham's account.

"If you write down these snapshots of your life history, then I'll help you assemble the photo album," he recalled telling her.

Part of Bigham's story being published this month in the museum's magazine — available online at <http://www.waynehistory.org/> — and Bigham will tell other parts Feb. 17, when she speaks at the museum.

Ultimately, Bigham hopes her story can help different groups and races come together and learn from each other.

"Through that you're going to learn more about yourself as a human being," she said.

"What I want people to get ... is personal growth and a sincere guide toward spirituality," she said. "I have committed my life to being a tool for change."