

on resource. They met twice a week at Bligen's home for nine years.

Over the course of those years as Bligen worked to achieve his life-long goal of literacy, another dream surfaced. This one was inspired by the comments of so many, including Krieger, when he would tell stories about his life.

"You should write that down," Krieger said people would tell Bligen. "You should write a book."

As fate would have it, only Krieger and a photograph of Bligen

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were on hand for a book signing at De Gullah Creations last weekend.

But he had lived to see his late-life wish come true — the book, in his words, compiled by Krieger, was put into print one month before his death.

"He was so excited, so proud," said Krieger, who spent most of the last year putting the book together from hours of tape recordings Bligen made.

The book, "Road Out of Darkness," is not unlike many self-published books, with a few glitches that a more professional publication would have cleared up.

But the story is a compelling one, both in the revealing details of the joys and sorrows of one man's life, and the cultural and historical gems of the Gullah people and the island.

The book tells about Bligen's hard-labor career, mostly in tunnel building, his military service, his marriage to his wife, Corena, and

his love for boxing as a young man.

He doesn't, however, pull any punches when he tells about growing up without a mother or father and the pain of losing his only son, Sherman, at 30 because of drug and alcohol addiction.

The book has stirred some controversy because of its honesty, which was one of Bligen's concerns about undertaking the project in the first place.

"He told me, 'I have some negative things to say, and I don't want to hurt anyone,'" Krieger said.

In the end, though, Bligen was happy about the book; glad he got to share his story and his feelings.

And, no doubt, the sweet irony of his last life project was not lost on Bligen.

He not only helped put together a book, but he could read it.

Krieger said proceeds from the book will be donated to Literacy Volunteers of the Lowcountry. The first 250 she had printed are almost gone and a second printing already has been ordered.

The literacy group's phone number is 686-6655.

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BILL BLIGEN

The service even reflected the former boxer's love of all things sports when Rose Driessen sang a spirited rendition of the gospel song, "Life is a Ball Game."

But even with the tender moments and glowing tributes, it's a safe bet Bligen would have been more comfortable after the crowd left the church and gathered on his beloved piece of property on Wild Horse Road.

That's where, according to longtime friend Lore Krieger, Bligen felt most at home. And where he most enjoyed having his friends and family gather, be it for his annual Labor Day shindig, or an impromptu get-together.

That's also where Bligen built an attractive home — and a new life — after returning to Hilton Head Island 15 years ago after spending more than four decades in New York. Coming back to his roots and his grandfather's plot of land, Bligen spent the last years of his life proving that it's never too late to improve oneself and that one person can make a difference.

A plaque mounted on the house tells of his love for both his home and the grandfather who bequeathed it to him.

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I, William Bligen, dedicate this house in the honor of my grandfather, William Bligen Sr., 1874-1958, who sweated and died on this land for his children to come. Dedicated May 28, 1989."

Bligen's comfortable digs also provided the setting for his relationship with Krieger. She is a volunteer with Literacy Volunteers of the Lowcountry, and he became her star pupil and a beloved friend.

While most tutor/student sessions are at the literacy organization's offices, Krieger had encouraged Bligen to get a computer so the lessons she provided could be supported with a hands-

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Legacy of literacy left by islander

As people packed every pew at Mt. Calvary Missionary Baptist Church to remember William "Uncle Bill" Bligen last month, the full circle of one life seemed complete.

As a small boy, Bligen, who died May 21 at 80, had come to the tiny church with his grandmother and other relatives. At his funeral there, people shared memories about how the native islander was a man of compassion and integrity. They recalled how he overcame obstacles to achieve his goals, including learning to read and write at age 69.

Bligen's two young godsons were there, testimony to his commitment to youth. He not only loved and mentored Brandon Brown and L.B. Ladson, but also countless others with whom he shared his beliefs — and showed by example — the importance of physical fitness and education.

A community activist, Bligen was eulogized as someone who was eager to point out a problem and then step up to the plate to help solve it.



Penny Starr