



Staff photo

Veronica S. Miller, center, tells stories about her early education on Hilton Head Island during the Old Island Neighborhood Schools reunion picnic at the Old Cherry Hill School building in 2014.

'Ain't nobody going to fill that void': Gullah culture advocate Miller dies

BY DAVID LAUDERDALE
dlauderdale@islandpacket.com

Veronica Simmons Miller, a quiet activist for Hilton Head Island's Gullah community, died at her home off Squire Pope Road on Thursday night.

She had been ill for a few years, though no one knew it, said her daughter, Faquita Aiken-Rivera. She was a month short of her 69th birthday.

"We have lost a real leader," said Thomas C. Barnwell Jr.

She was active in the Native Islanders Business and Community Affairs Association and its annual Gullah Celebration, and was secretary of the local NAACP chapter.

As president of the Stoney/Squire Pope Property Owners Association, she pushed the Town of Hilton Head Island for many years to get water and sewer service to all island homes.

"I don't see the reason why the town can't afford it," she told our newspaper in 2015. "They can afford everything else they want to afford."

In 1995, she served on the local steering committee when the American Institute of Architects sent a Rural/Design Urban Assistance Team (RUDAT) to study Hilton Head issues.

Twenty years later, she said not enough had been done to resolve problems of the non-gated communities on Hilton Head.

"A town should be for the people, not some people," she said. "I just think we need to sit around the table one more time."

She did see progress.

Sanitary sewer service came to her neighborhood in 2013, but not everyone could afford to hook into the system. That spring, Miller and a grandson used quilts and blankets to sop up wastewater in her home from a backed-up septic tank. She later was connected to the Hilton Head Public Service District's sewer system thanks to a grant from Project SAFE, through the Community Foundation of the Lowcountry.

She worked to keep the Gullah presence on Hilton Head alive.

As a representative of Baygall, Grasslawn, Chaplin and Marshland, Spanish Wells, Jonesville and Squire Pope/Stoney POA's, she explained to the town that a proposed name for a rowing and sailing center on Squire Pope Road failed to reflect the native community's uses of the area — for crabbing, fishing, and arts and crafts festivals — according to town minutes. The name then was tweaked to become the Rowing and Sailing Center at Squire Pope Community Park.

"She instilled in us the different nuggets of our Gullah heritage that she had learned, and we don't want it to be forgotten," said her daughter.

Miller attended one of the small, Gullah commu-

nity elementary schools on Hilton Head and then high school in Bluffton before going to Spelman College in Atlanta and getting a science degree from Savannah State University. She later got a master's degree from Armstrong State University.

She was a laboratory technician at the Beaufort-Jasper-Hampton Comprehensive Health Services and later, for 35 years, at Hilton Head Hospital.

She taught science for 16 years at the public high school and middle schools on Hilton Head and at Bluffton Middle School. She retired this spring, her daughter said.

Miller was a director of the Institute for Community Education and Training that offered after-school and summer educational and cultural enrichment programs for island schoolchildren.

She reared two children — Faquita and Brandon Miller — and helped raise the two oldest of her six grandchildren.

She was a member of the Drayton-Jones family of Hilton Head, tracing her lineage to Matthew Jones, one of the early residents of historic Mitchelville community during the Civil War and a veteran of the 21st United States Colored Infantry Regiment. He later bought 27 acres in the Stoney community.

Miller spoke of him in 2015 when the Hilton Head Island Land Trust unveiled a 30-pound

sheet-metal sculpture of a member of another African-American regiment at Fort Howell at Mitchelville.

"This is a very, very important day just to memorialize and commemorate him for serving his country and also leaving a legacy for his family here on Hilton Head," she said.

That connection was celebrated in 2014, when Miller was one of four presenters at Town Hall when the Heritage Library Foundation rolled out results of its years of research in a presentation called "People on Hilton Head Island During the Civil War: Who Are They?"

She was a leader of the Community Awareness Group that in 2013 hosted "An Evening with Jonathan Green" to raise money for the Mount Calvary Achievement School, Agape Family Life Center in Jasper County and the American Cancer Society.

She was active at the Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church before more recently worshipping at the Greater Pentecostal Temple in Levy.

She was known for her speaking ability and her prayers. "She did an awesome prayer," her daughter said.

But Barnwell, a member of the Hilton Head Island Hall of Fame, said her quiet work toward democracy will be hardest to replace.

"She was very active when it was time to vote, which to me is very important, with encouraging community residents to utilize their vote," he said. "That, to me, is a void for this Squire Pope/Stoney area. Ain't nobody going to fill that void."

David Lauderdale:
843-706-8115,
@ThatsLauderdale