

Oct 10, 1996

A teacher's inspiring legacy



JEAN SHIFRIN / Staff

Nancy Johnson Miller returned Wednesday to Hooper Alexander Elementary School, where, as a fifth-grader 25 years ago, she met physical education teacher Lonnie Edwards. By encouraging her not to be ashamed of having most of her fingers missing, Edwards helped her be all she could be, she told a small group that had arranged the emotional homecoming. Edwards, now an assistant superintendent for the DeKalb County school system, noted that most of those at the reunion were crying, but "I used up my tears," in the last two weeks, since the TV show "Sally Jessy Raphael" brought the two back together. But by the time he finished speaking, he too was in tears. Hugging Miller, he advised the gathering, "Be careful what you say to fifth-graders."

THE POWER OF KINDNESS

Oct 8/10 10/21/96

Nancy was different, and the teasing of children was taking its toll. But her teacher insisted that she face life and do her best. She took his advice to heart.

By Doug Cumming
STAFF WRITER

Teachers never know when the things they say and do will change a child forever, so Lonnie Edwards thought "Sally Jessy Raphael" had the wrong man when New York called.

Remember Nancy Miller, who said you were the greatest teacher in her life? asked the producer of the TV talk show.

"No, I have no idea who you're talking about," Edwards said from his Decatur office, a room filled with the diplomas and awards of 22 years as an administrator with the DeKalb County school system. He had taught only for three years, starting in 1971, when Hooper Alexander Elementary snatched him between a Chicago Bulls rookie camp and the Vietnam draft.

The school made him its physical education coordinator, the first black man to teach in a school that was, like the entire DeKalb system, near the beginning of a long court-ordered racial rearrangement. Now an education insider, Edwards had almost forgotten the days when he was an outsider.

Then the New York producer mentioned the square dance class, and Edwards knew that Nancy Miller was Nancy Johnson, the little redhead who hung her head and carried a towel over her folded hands.

Nancy had been born with no fingers, only vestigial thumbs and pinkies with which she could hold a pencil.

Amazingly, she hid her deformity from teachers at Alexander for her first year there, fourth grade, by doing good work and hiding her hands under a towel. But other students knew, and "were crueler to her than I knew," Edwards said.

Miller, 37, is flying to Atlanta today from Orlando, where she lives with her husband and four children. In a reunion hastily planned by Edwards' staff and teachers who have been at Alexander since the 1970s, she and Edwards, at noon, are going back to the school on Memorial Drive.

This will be the second time she has seen him since 1986, when they briefly

crossed paths during a year in which she worked for the DeKalb system as a clerk in the supply office.

The other recent reunion was two weeks ago, when "Sally Jessy Raphael" flew her to New York to tell her story. Last year, the show had asked viewers to write about a special person — a teacher, a friend — who had made a difference in their lives, someone they would love to see again. Miller wrote about Edwards, and many months later was in New York telling her story to a studio audience.

That show will air at 11 a.m. Monday on WAGA/Channel 5.

Miller, on camera, had been led to believe that the show's producers were unable to reach Edwards. So she was making her plea to all of America to tell "Mr. Edwards" she wanted to thank him. She read a poem she had written, saying: "I was a small child of early years and a student of yours who holds you dear . . . Your dedication made me the lady I am today."

And she held up her hands for all to see, telling the world she could do anything she set her mind to, including play the piano and type 65 words a minute. The audience gasped and applauded.

She said she only wished she could see her teacher again. On cue, Edwards came bounding out from backstage with a bouquet of flowers, saying, "I know, and I can help you find him."

"That's when she just let all the emotions out that she had brought to New York with her," Edwards recalled. "She was screaming and crying."

Miller remembers almost everyone around her in tears as the two embraced,



JONATHAN NEWTON / Staff

As a teacher, Lonnie Edwards gave a shy little girl a lesson in courage and dignity. Today, 25 years later, she's coming to visit him in Atlanta.

so intensely that the show "had to take a break to get us apart."

In September 1971, when Nancy was in fifth grade, Edwards had her in one of his first P.E. classes. Both, today, remember the story the same way.

Edwards had explained square dancing to the 70 or so students, and called their names to direct them to their places, boy-girl, boy-girl. When her name was called, Nancy said she

was not coming. "Yes, you are," said Edwards. She turned and walked away. Edwards dropped his clipboard, with a clatter and came after her. The other students gasped.

Nancy began crying uncontrollably. Was this a racial thing? Edwards wondered, approaching her cautiously, and kneeling. With their backs to the other students, she slowly removed the towel, privately revealing to him why she couldn't possibly hold hands with boys.

Taken aback, Edwards gathered himself and said: "Nancy, we can't do anything about this problem, but I can help you overcome it and become the best you can be. Now I want you to hold your head up. From this moment on, you will no longer use this as a limitation. If you do, it will always be a limitation."

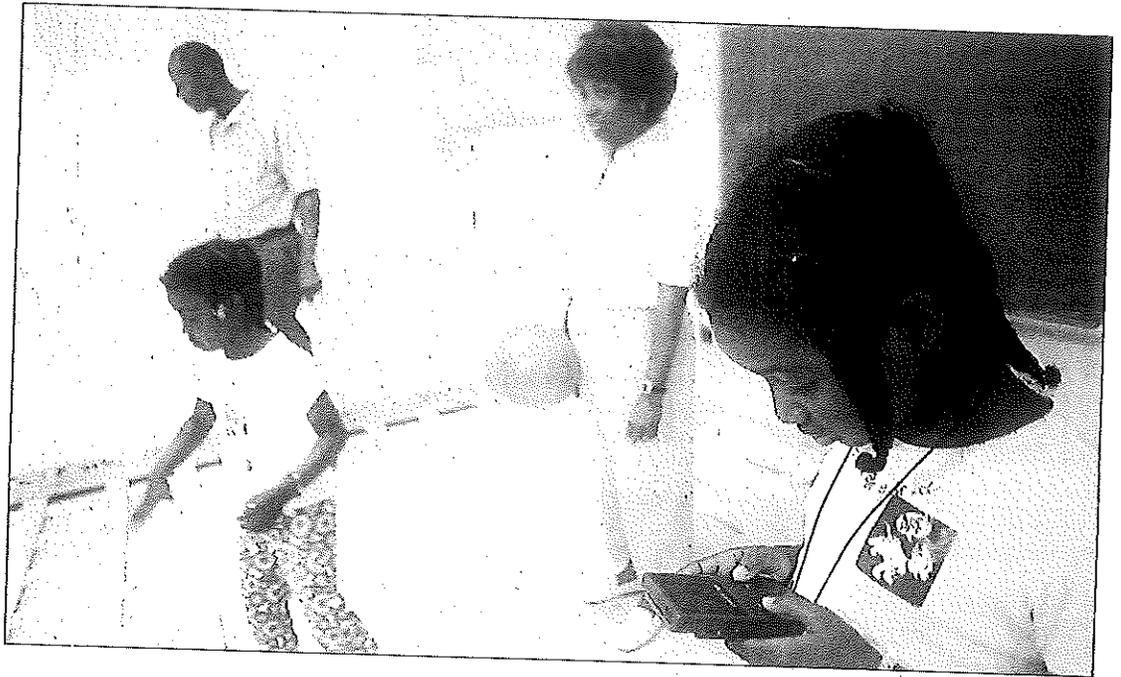
Slowly, she gave him the towel, which he put in his back pocket, never to return it. The next day, he began the square dance as Nancy's partner, and by the end of the week, all the children seemed willing, even eager, to touch her hands.

Over the next three years, little nudges of encouragement from Edwards made Nancy who she is today, she says. "I used to be a person who had low self-esteem," she says. "I grew up because of one man."



PHILAN M. EBENHACK / Spectat

FJC 8/1/02



Raven Gibson, 9, (right) plays with her GameBoy, while (from left) Ryane Gibson, 6, Everett Edwards, technical theater teacher, and Wanda Jackson, mother of the two girls, check out progress on the dance studio. LUIS SANCHEZ SATURNO / Staff

Hooper Alexander gets role of magnet arts school

By KAREN HILL
khill@ajc.com

Nine-year-old Raven Gibson is planning a busy year in the fourth grade at DeKalb County's new consolidated arts magnet school.

"I want to learn how to play the xylophone, then the saxophone and violin," Raven said.

And music isn't even her favorite subject.

"My favorite is dance, then it's a tie between acting and art," she said.

Raven will be one of 580 students in grades k-7 at the former Hooper Alexander Elementary School, now tentatively called the DeKalb Elementary School of the Arts at Hooper Alexander.

The small, red brick school, tucked atop a hill overlooking a commercial stretch of Memorial Drive near Decatur, is the consolidated, single home of arts students previously scattered at three central DeKalb schools: Hooper

Alexander, Avondale and Atherton elementary schools.

Students are selected by lottery before they begin kindergarten. They take the usual academic subjects but also spend one hour each day studying a variety of arts.

They even learn the technical aspects of production, such as lighting, sound and set construction. Even in this behind-the-scenes corner of the arts, teachers watch for future stars.

"I'll call the teachers at the vocational schools and tell them, 'I've got a kid who's just great. He's only in fifth grade, but he's ready for you,'" said Everett Edwards, one of two technical theater teachers at the new school.

Consolidating the elementary arts magnets made a few more spaces available to new students, said Deloris Banks, a DeKalb school administrator responsible for magnets.

It also freed up enough classroom space at Avondale and Atherton for non-magnet

students that workers were able to remove 12 trailers from those campuses, Banks said.

But the primary advantage, Banks said, is that it allows one elementary school to "feed" students directly to the DeKalb School of the Arts, for students in grades 8-12.

One location also might make it easier for the magnet program to add more students later, Banks said.

Norma Rushing, the principal at Hooper Alexander, said she was especially proud of how the arts magnet can help special-education students.

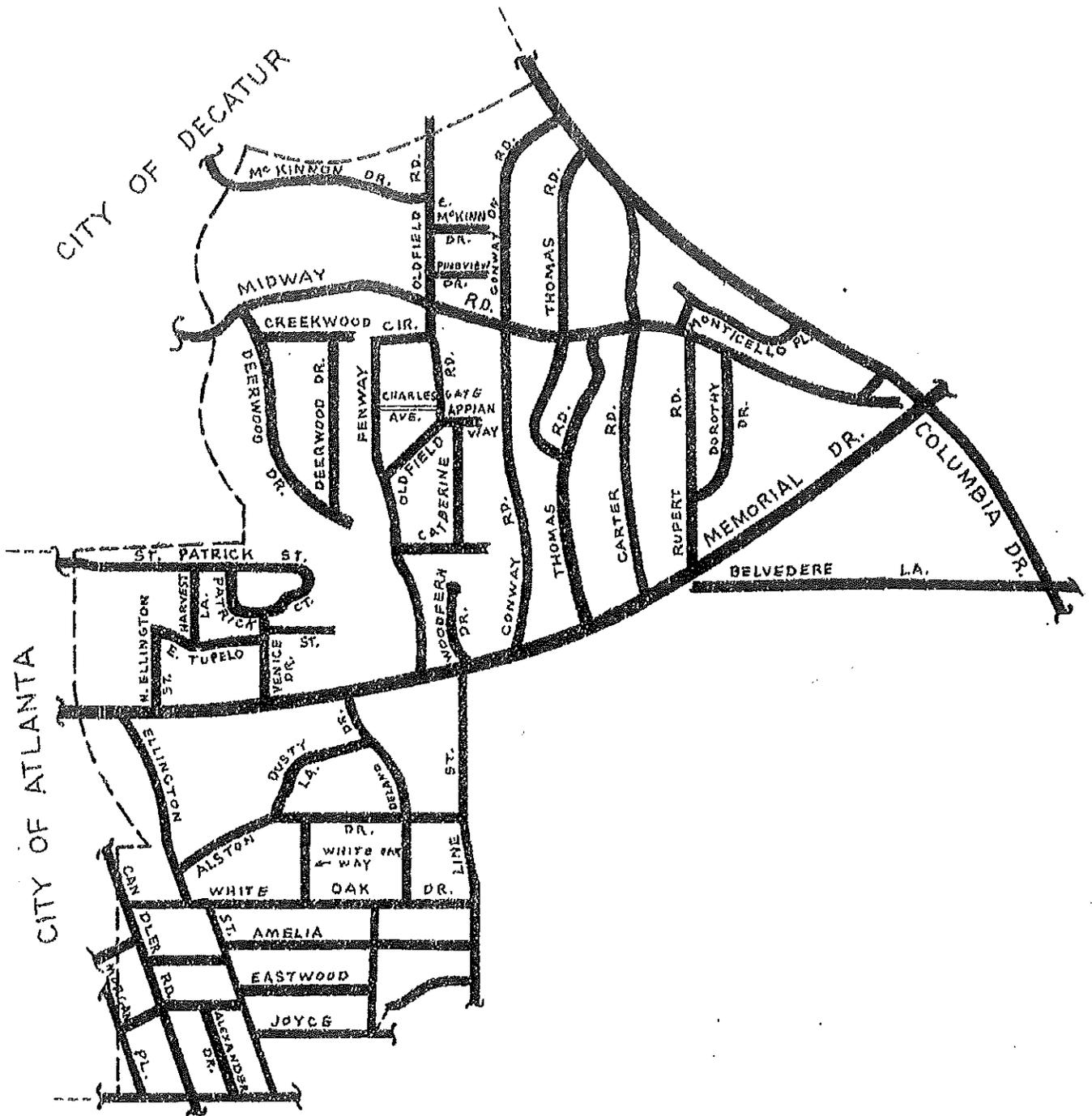
"Those children often do very well in performing arts," Rushing said.

"They have trouble reading, but they can memorize pages of script."

A few years ago, Rushing said, the school's outstanding drama student was a child with learning disabilities.

"We can't deny those children that opportunity. It could be what they do in life," she said.

10/11/1966



HOOPER ALEXANDER SCHOOL
ATTENDANCE AREA

May 5, 1966

Mrs. B. G. Nicholson
Route #1,
Box 13,
Pekin, Indiana

Dear Mrs. Nicholson:

Would you be kind enough to furnish any additional information which you might have or remember concerning our Hooper Alexander School during the "war years"? We have an almost complete history of the school and its activities except for this period. Could you tell us who replaced you, when you left, etc.

Mr. Cherry has asked each school in the County, no matter how young or old, to write a history of its beginning, building, naming, neighborhood, etc.. He also wants each school to send in an additional page each year on progress, etc. for addition to this information.

About three years ago Mrs. Lazenby, who is President of the P. T. A. this year, worked very hard on this subject, but she had very little on the "war years". So, we have almost completed our job except for this small period.

Any information or help, which you can give will be greatly appreciated.

Hooper Alexander is still growing, and now we have a full time Librarian, an excellent lunchroom program, and a host of wonderful teachers to go with it.

I am looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Jos. W. Grantham
2836 Midway Road,
Decatur, Georgia 30030
Scrapbook Chairman,
Hooper Alexander School,
Decatur, Georgia

HOOPER ALEXANDER SCHOOL
Growth and Progress Report
1938 - 1952

1. Historical background
2. Contributions - land, etc.
3. Building (pictures)
 - a. Classrooms, shops, etc.
 - b. Cafeterias
 - c. Equipment
4. List of Principals, district superintendents,
and trustees by years.
5. Enrollment by years
6. Curriculum - school clubs - sports
7. Community interest and support
 - a. F. T. A.
 - b. Civic Clubs
8. Transportation

In 1947, three classrooms were added and the cafeteria was connected to the school building. These additions amounted to \$20,000. Then as the school continued to have increased enrollments, six more classrooms were added in 1950, along with a kitchen and an enlarged auditorium. The entire school was at this time brick veneered. The cost of these improvements was \$45,000, making a total of \$86,250 spent on the building from 1938-1950. For the 1951-52 term, the driveway is in the process of being paved, and enlarged, and two rooms were converted into classrooms. This makes a total of seventeen classrooms, a cafeteria four restrooms, teacher's lounge, infirmary, two book rooms, vestibule, and the principal's office.

The growth of the cafeteria during these fourteen years shows the same great progress. Starting with one stove and one refrigerator in 1938, about 80 meals were served each day. In 1945 the P. T. A. purchased a new electric stove and the next year had two tables made. In 1948, equipment such as the following was added; one stack oven, and three section sink, pressure cooker, boilers, cookie sheets, additional silver, and 400 plastic plates. In 1949, a dishwasher, milk cooler, mixer, four stools, and 25 dining room chairs were placed in the cafeteria.

During the 1951-52 term, the lunch room became a Grade "A" cafeteria, under the supervision of Mrs. Odessa Horne, who is a graduate home economist, one of four such qualified lunch room managers in the county at this time. During this term many improvements have been made. The kitchen was plastered, and painted, the sinks painted, shelves put in the stock room, a table rebuilt, two new ones made, and built-in kitchen cabinets added. A new system for distributing milk was installed with the purchase of a milk dispenser, a cup dispenser, and cup holders. Individual trays were used for the first time. Also purchased in the way of equipment was the following; steam table, bun warmer, pre-rinse sink, hot water heater five dozen forks, stainless steel silver bin, and twenty-two dozen compartment plates.

The school has added a great deal of equipment and teaching aids as it has increased its size. From 1939 to 1945, the audio-visual aids consisted of maps, globes, and one hand-operated phonograph. Then between 1945 and 1951 a motion picture projector, film strip and slide projector, 4FM-AM radios, two AM combination radio and record players, rainbow rhythm records, 1 set of world

The school began its first session with 211 pupils and 7 teachers. The following list shows the growth of the school in enrollment and number of teachers since 1938:

1939-1940	225	7
1940-1941	284	7
1941-1942	193	6
1942-1943	196	7
1943-1944	211	7
1944-1945	211	7
1945-1946	216	7
1946-1947	246	7
1947-1948	326	9
1948-1949	387	11
1949-1950	471	12
1950-1951	567	15
1951-1952	677	18

In 1950-1951 the P. T. A. employed two special subject teachers - an art teacher with an AB degree and a music teacher with three years college work. All teachers in 1950 held professional certificates. In 1952 the average teacher certification for the faculty is above four years college training.

The curriculum of the school consists of a seven year elementary program with classroom art and music. Expression classes are available for primary pupils.

There is a 4-H Club, class citizenship clubs, sixth grade literary club, and an active patrol organization.

The Physical education is sponsored in each classroom, Out-of-school play activities are directed by Mr. Edward Heerschap, who also teaches a sixth grade.

The parent-teacher organization was begun in 1938 with 45 members. There were 150 families represented in the school at that time. The membership has increased to 332 in 1952. There are 450 families represented in the school today.

The budget set up in 1944 was \$85.00 and in 1950 it was \$1,372.00. In 1952 it was cut to \$230.00 used to meet necessary expenses, but approximately \$1450 has been spent on special projects for the school. The P.T.A. is a very active organization - vitally interested in the welfare and progress of the school.

✓ *Hooper Alexander*



PARENT-TEACHER ASSOCIATION

MEMORIAL DRIVE
DECATUR, GEORGIA

DEKALB COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEM
DEKALB BUILDING
DECATUR, GEORGIA

April 1, 1967

To the Parent or Guardian:

You live in the attendance zone of _____ HOOPER ALEXANDER SCHOOL
School located at _____ 3414 MEMORIAL DR.
DECATUR, GA. 30030

Your child is assigned to this school for the 1967-68 school term. You may register your child for the next school term at any time between April 1 and the opening of the fall term of school.

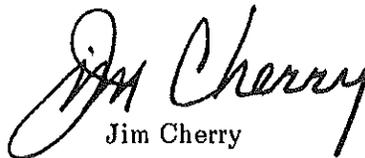
Attached is the "Notice of School Desegregation Plan Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," which was published in the newspaper. Please keep a copy of this notice. It will answer many questions about school desegregation.

Bus service will be provided for those students who live outside a one-mile radius of the school. Additional information about bus service may be obtained from the principal of the school in your attendance zone or from the Department of Attendance and Transportation.

Your child will attend the above named school next year unless you exercise your right to transfer to another school before you register your child for the 1967-68 school term.

The provisions governing transfers from your assigned school zone are listed in paragraphs (a), (b), (c), and (d) of Section 3 of the attached notice. Forms for transfer may be obtained from the Superintendent's office or the office of any principal, or a letter requesting a transfer may be addressed to the principal of the school to which transfer is requested.

Sincerely yours,



Jim Cherry

DeKalb School Superintendent