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Spelman civil rights foot soldiers featured in documentary

Their story is the subject of an independent documentary entitled “Foot Soldiers: Class of 1964”

LOCAL NEWS

By Gracie Bonds Staples

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A partial list of the Spelman grads featured in film:

· Dolores Young Strawbridge, 70, Decatur, retired Atlanta Public Schools teacher. Psychology major with a minor in elementary education and masters from Georgia State University in early childhood education.

· Sadye Beasley Gray, 70, Decatur, retired national board certified teacher with DeKalb County Schools.

Roslyn Pope, Ph.D., 74, Atlanta, professor of English and humanities at Atlanta Metropolitan State College. Music major with minors in English and French.

· Georgianne Thomas, 70, Atlanta, French major with minor in secondary education; professor of humanities at Clark Atlanta University and French at Atlanta Metropolitan State College. Retired from Delta Air Lines, Inc.

· Gloria Knowles Bell, 68, College Park. Majored in biology and minored in chemistry and math. Retired from Delta Air Lines, Inc.

· Billie Pitts Williams, 70, Atlanta. Majored in sociology and minored in secondary education. Retired Atlanta Public Schools teacher.

· Valjean Williams, 70, Atlanta. Majored in home economics and secondary education. Retired Atlanta Public Schools teacher.

Malinda Clark Logan, 69, Atlanta. Music major. Retired Atlanta Public Schools music teacher. Now teaching part-time at APS.

· Deborah Dorsey Mitchell, 70, Atlanta. Majored in psychology, minor in elementary education, masters in early childhood education. Retired Atlanta Public Schools teacher.

Next Broadcast Dates for [Foot Soldiers: Class of 1964](#):
10 p.m. January 17

6 p.m. January 20

WPBA-TV30, Atlanta's PBS station (PBA30)

They were 16-, 17-, and 18-year-old freshmen when they entered Spelman College that summer. Some had grown up in mixed neighborhoods. Others knew segregation like the back of their hands.

Education promised all of them a better life. That's why they were there. The fight for equality could wait.

All of them, though, knew better. Life had taught them at least that much.

"All my life I had to be colored," said Dolores Young Strawbridge of Decatur recently. "I couldn't do this. I couldn't do that. It was time for me to be treated like a human being with respect and dignity."

And so despite their parent's stern warning not to participate, Strawbridge, now 70, and other members of the freshman class eagerly joined the student protests sweeping the country.

Their story is the subject of an independent documentary entitled "[Foot Soldiers: Class of 1964](#)" airing on PBS through January. The documentary, written, produced and directed by Alvelyn Sanders, was selected recently for screening Feb. 7-18 at the 21st Pan African Film Festival Los Angeles. It screened at [Atlanta's BronzeLens Film Festival](#) in November.

With its emphasis on non-violent social change, the student movement was like fire to the civil rights movement, fueling a new focus and energy. Still those students, many from middle class families who'd lost their belief that America could work even for blacks like them, have for decades remained nameless.

Alvelyn Sanders, though, had grown up seeing those faces and hearing the stories. Her mother is one of them, Georgianne Thomas.

“What intrigued me most was what made these young women want to follow their upper-class leaders,” Sanders said. “They arrived on campus in August 1960 to pick a major, maybe join a club. What made them willing to face the Ku Klux Klan, to be spat upon, to be arrested? What moved them to action?”

Strawbridge had grown up in a middle class family in the small segregated town of Louisburg, Tenn., near Nashville. Her mother was a school teacher, her father a Methodist minister.

By the time she and the dozen or so women seated with her recently entered Spelman College in 1961, history had already taken a giant leap forward.

The [sit-ins sparked by four Greensboro, N.C. college students](#) the year before had forced the Woolworth department store to desegregate its lunch counters. And the written appeal "to end the scourge of desegregation" that set in motion Atlanta's student movement had been published in this newspaper.

“I had just returned from Paris, where no one told me where I couldn't go or what I couldn't do,” said Roslyn Pope who authored the appeal. “I had been unshackled. I was looking for a movement.”

Pope, however, graduated in 1960 and it fell to Strawbridge, Sadye Beasley Gray, Georgianne Thomas and these other women to carry out what Pope had started.

Pope, whose appeal would eventually end up in the Congressional Record, said that in many ways the students' protests were symbolic.

“We were Rich's credit card carriers,” she said. “We spent money there but we couldn't try on anything.

The protests, then, were never really just about eating at lunch counters or Rich's famed Magnolia room. They also were about obtaining fair wages and hiring practices.

“The appeal targeted education, law enforcement, hospitals and employment practices,” said Pope, who worked mostly as an organizer behind the scene.

Strawbridge joined the protest against Grady Hospital for refusing to treat African-Americans.

So did Malinda Clark Logan, now 68.

She said the pain of seeing her parents having to be afraid of white people, primed her for the protests at Rich's and Grady Hospital.

Logan recalled her first experience with the KKK, turning out the lights in their small wood-frame home, pulling the shades down and waiting for the KKK to parade through the south Georgia town of Cairo.

"I remember feeling this intense fear and foreboding, not knowing if they were going to stop, shoot or burn a cross," she said.

Although her father was a school principal and her mother was a teacher, she said, "whenever white people were around, they had to say yes sir, no sir, no matter the age."

Sadye Beasley Gray, who grew up in Massachusetts, had never been to the South when she came to Spelman. Segregation greeted her the moment the pullman porter dropped her bags in front of the colored-only dining room at the train station.

"I noticed this other room was well lit and so large it drew you in," Gray said. "Everybody was looking at me but I continued on and then suddenly God sent someone to me and said, 'Miss you have to go into the other room.'"

Gray went from that dingy colored room to the picket line at Rich's. By Sept. 28, 1961, all Atlanta lunch counters, schools and state and federal office buildings were desegregated.

Sanders said the documentary, which debuted Dec. 27, is her way of thanking each of the women.

"This is my digital libation for the ancestors and the women in this room."