

Stories of Northside: Betty Guffin

INTERVIEWEE: **TOMMY GUFFIN**



Sometimes stories are so powerful, they transcend lifetimes. Moses, while fumbling for words in front of a burning bush, probably never imagined that his story would be carried in the hearts of Israelites for generations before it was ever written down. Likewise, when Rahab demonstrated uncharacteristic obedience in

Jericho, or when Simon pushed out for one last attempt at a catch because Jesus told him to, probably never imagined that 2,000 years later millennials would be sipping macchiatos and tweeting “I’m such a Peter.”

They didn’t know, but God knew. God knew that their stories would

live on because their obedient hearts and courageous action contained the story and promise of God. Through Moses, God was able to instruct his people. Through Rahab, God was able to deliver the Promised Land to Joshua. Through Peter, God was able to birth his church.

Stories that emulate God’s goodness never truly leave us. We will always carry them in our hearts. One such story is that of Ms. Betty Guffin. Like so many others in our Stories of Northside series, you can scarcely tell Northside’s story without telling hers. Likewise, you can scarcely tell of God’s goodness without recounting folks like her who dedicated their lives to serving him. Ms. Betty passed on February 23, 2018, but her story still lives on through us. It is our great pleasure to honor her here.

This is the story of Betty Guffin, as told by her son, Tommy Guffin.

“Mother was born in Atlanta, Georgia in July of 1926. She was a Methodist from birth, and her mother was an extremely prominent Methodist. Mother was also a singer from a very early age—a coloratura soprano—and she trained at Converse and in New York and around the tri-state area. My father was in residency at the time, and they married in 1948. His residency, however, was

cut short, and he was instead sent to Korea. She went back to Atlanta. There was no opera, and there wasn’t a lot of professional stuff going on in the Atlanta music scene at the time, so she mostly did church music from then on. For years, she performed at Glenn Memorial UMC as the soprano soloist, and that’s where Northside comes in.

“Northside was founded in November of 1950. At the time, service was held at Northside High School. Having no official choir, Glenn Memorial lent their soloists to get the church off the ground. Mother sang at Northside’s inaugural service; I remember her talking about that. She sang ‘How Beautiful Upon the Mountains.’

“After Glenn Memorial, she ended up at Peachtree Road Methodist, until her very close friend, Jack Crawford, became the choir director at Northside Methodist. She just jumped at the chance to work with him. It was around 1980.

She and my father moved their membership over to Northside Methodist. I was already attending, and she and I sang in the choir for a little while with the soloists. When I went away to medical school, she remained there until she retired her voice around 1983 or 1984. She decided that sopranos didn’t get better with age. She knew she was either going to have to work a little harder or quit singing, so she opted to quit singing. Mother went out on a good note; she was actually a very fine singer.

“She was also a woman of strong faith. It had always been a part of her life, and she and Daddy were very much church-going people—the church was the center of their life, even the center of their social life. Daddy died when he was fairly young, 63, and that was a real blow for Mother, because they had just been such a wonderful couple. They were so close and so well-suited for each other. »





"After his passing, she settled at Northside. She wasn't singing anymore, so she had energy and time to get more involved in the running of the church—and in true form; apparently the women in this family, they do like to run things. She was on the Staff Parish Relations Committee, and she was in charge of the Funeral Guild, which is why her funeral was easy to do. She knew what she wanted, and she knew what she didn't want. It was written down, and all we had to do was just do it. It was actually really kind of nice.

"She was also very much into volunteering. After my father passed, she got her first real job as the director of Volunteer Services at West Paces Ferry Hospital. She held that position until they closed, but she was always a big

believer in volunteering and took it very seriously. It made her mad when people would volunteer and not take it very seriously. She ran a tight ship. If you volunteered and didn't come when you were supposed to, then you didn't get to volunteer anymore. She loved her work with Northside. She loved just coming into the building. They treated her so well here, especially in her later years. She would come here to sign the checks; that was a big day because she'd go around and visit everybody. She considered herself the Mother Confessor of the entire staff and just loved to talk to them.

"That was very much Mother. She lived a wonderful life, and she was very active and her mind

was very active. She fell ill at the end, but even still, she was clear enough to just say, 'No. I don't want to spend my last few months in a hospital. I want to go into hospice.' She had nurses that she absolutely adored, and they were so wonderful for her. She was home, and it was good for us because we didn't have to make any horrible decisions. She made the decisions, and she was able to make the decisions. She knew she was going to die, and she was not afraid of it.

"I think she waited to die until Gil Watson got there and talked to her about what she wanted for her funeral. I think she actually hung on. When he came to her house—she loved him very much—she's like, 'Gil, I've been waiting for you. Where have you been?' They had a long discussion. Part of it was the funeral, but I think they

just had a deep discussion. It was actually later the next morning that she died. I really think she was hanging on to talk to him.

"Mother was a very strong Christian woman. She raised her children that way. She was certainly raised that way. That was part of her faith. You are supposed to do things to help other people. You are supposed to be in service. That mentality permeated everything from her singing to her volunteer work. I think it helped

keep her mind clear, especially towards the end. She was out communicating and doing stuff with people all the time. She felt strongly that a life of service was one she wanted to lead. She taught all of us kids—me, Arty, and Martha Ellen—and it was such a part of her life that she didn't even think about it."

Although we are still saddened by Ms. Betty's passing, her story

and outpouring live on through us. It certainly lives on through Tommy, who officially rejoined Northside this past February. Having attended the church's first Nursery and Kindergarten with his brother, Arty, he too is steeped in our history. Tommy now lends his voice to our Chancel Choir whenever possible and is excited to call Northside his home again. Like so many others in the Bible, Ms. Betty lived a life of service, carrying God's story and promise to each person she encountered, and like those same folks, she didn't even think about it. Those are the stories that are passed on. Those are the stories that transcend lifetimes. Her example is the story Tommy, Arty, Martha Ellen, and all who knew her now carry. Let it now speak to you in an equally powerful way. ☸