

TRACING ROOTS BACK TO THE CIVIL WAR

Descendants of Monroe Gordon, Sr. meet every other year. This year's reunion in July was held in Dallas and Fort Worth, beginning with a dinner. Then there was a trip to Six Flags for the young family members and a picnic, church and visits to relatives.

Debora Ibetayo Muhammad said the three-day event was "pretty successful" but also calls for a lot of work. It was her cousin, actually, Marie Bryant, who has been instrumental in keeping her family reunion going.

"We decided to have ours every two years because it is difficult to plan every year," said Ms. Muhammad. "This time more people came from northern states."

Although they can trace their roots back to Gordon, back in the Civil War days, Ms. Muhammad said the Gordons migrated from South Carolina to east Texas.



Shahzaade Lofton
Class of 2005

The reason they were able to trace their roots back to the Civil War is because of the collaborative efforts of family members, said Ms. Muhammad. Prior to the reunion, she said information was distributed to family members telling them that the family was "trying to put together our pedigree."

"It was a lot of fun," she

said. "And when we got here, we put the information up on a wall in the hotel. It was the first time we got to know some of our people."

This year they encouraged family members to talk to one another and gather information to share with the group.

"This time we focused on education," she continued, adding that there were a number of high school and college graduates. In fact, one family had the father, mother, two daughters and a daughter-in-law to graduate from the same college, at the same time, since the last reunion two years ago.

It was really exciting to have all the graduates, said Ms. Muhammad, who included her daughter, Shahzaade Akua Lofton, of the Yvonne A. Ewell Townview Center, among the class of 2005.

Ms. Muhammad was the keynote speaker at this year's banquet. The principal of Africa Care Academy, Ms. Muhammad, focused on educating chil-

dren and celebrating her family's heritage.

CELEBRATING FREEDOM

When Joyce Ann Brown was released from prison, after spending nine years, five months and 24 days for a crime she didn't commit, her family was there. Really her family had been there all along, but this was cause for celebration.

Then the talk turned to family get-togethers and out of the conversations, the Tarrant Myers Family Reunion was born.

Tarrant was the father and Myers was the mother. They had 13 children and today five are still living: Aunt Dorothy (84), Aunt Ruby better known as MaDear (81), Aunt Dodie (75), Uncle June (72) and Uncle Buddy (70).

Thanks to M.L. and Louise Tarrant who organize the annual event, the second weekend in September.

Even at 76, Ms. Tarrant is diligent and dedicated as she organizes the annual event.

Talk about a fun time, the Tarrants and Myers take this family reunion business to another level. They have folks who aren't even in the family planning to attend! Actress/comedian Phyllis Yvonne Stickney, members and employees of MASS Mothers (Fathers) for the Advancement of Social Systems and many family friends are among those who join the festivities.

And once they are there, the fun begins.

Of course, there's the picnic and the talent show. There's plenty of food and games, too. Horseback riding, swimming, basketball and softball keep them entertained. And of course, they do the Electric Slide.

The two and a half day affair begins with prayers. Kids play their games, the adults play theirs and they have family games competing against one another. They end with the family church choir singing and praying. The next day they are off to church.

Ma Dear, Jiggy, Junebug, Papoose, Bean, Buster, Spanky, Cousin Dish and a whole lot of other nicknames are in attendance, but if you go to the talent show, you are sure to see Tina Turner, Destiny's Child, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Bobby Blue Bland, Erykah Badu, the Supremes, some of the hottest rappers, like Bow Wow and much more.

This talent show is a big deal for the family.

"We start rehearsing the last week of July and then the night before is like a dress rehearsal and we have fried fish at my momma's house," said Koquice Spencer, the third oldest of 27 of MaDear's grandchildren. "My momma (Joyce Ann Brown) is the show's emcee."

The big event at the talent show this year is 15 of MaDear's grandchildren performing Missy Elliott's "Lose



Members of the Tarrant Myers Family at annual reunion. They gather again next weekend.

Control," featuring Ciara.

But Ms. Spencer, her daughter Brittney and cousin Dejuana Kelley-Murat will provide flavor to the show when they perform Destiny's Child's "Cater to you."

VEGAS STYLE

Tired of only meeting under auspicious circumstances such as funerals, Ze-Enna Jenkins' family decided to change that. For the past 49 years, her family has held annual family reunions



Ze-Enna Jenkins'
family has long
history of reunions

criss-crossing the nation from California to New York to St. Louis to Las Vegas.

"The only time our family got together was when someone passed," explained Ms. Jenkins. "Then, they would have a big huge dinner or picnic at a park sitting under a tree. We got tired of sitting under the tree

swatting flies."

For Ms. Jenkins' 27 years, she can remember traveling across the country to "fellowship" with family members at the Beckley Family Reunion and she recounted with fondness her trips to Chicago, Philadelphia, New Jersey and Milwaukee to be reunited with family each year.

Each July 4, Ms. Jenkins' family hosts reunions where there is a family "club" who organizes the reunion.

This year, more than 300 members of the Beckley family gathered in Las Vegas anxious for their goodie bags, recreational activities, a banquet memorial service to honor those family members that have passed away during the past year.

The Beckley Family Reunion seems to have it all with its award and recognition presentation.

"We give awards for youngest, oldest and farthest traveled," said Ms. Jenkins.

To host a reunion of this magnitude, they begin organizing at least a year in advance collecting dues, securing venues and disseminating information in their family newsletter.

Even though her family reunion is a time for fellowship and fun, Ms. Jenkins said they are working to address health issues within the family.

"Now we are trying to incorporate a health fair because a lot of us have health problems," she said.

With each passing year, Ms. Jenkins, moves closer to being passed the torch and carrying on a great family tradition. She said it is up to her and other young people in the family to carry on.

"Now, we've got to get the young people on board like myself," said Ms. Jenkins. "When it's time to plan our reunion in the Southwest region, I am going to have to step up and do it. If we don't get the young people involved, it's going to die down."

Next year, Ms. Jenkins' family will be in Atlanta and also hope to go on a cruise to commemorate their 50th family reunion. It's something Ms. Jenkins is looking forward to.

"Family is the main thing to us. It's the most important thing to us. We make sure everyone gets together," said Ms. Jenkins. "All I got is my family, and I love our reunions!"

And many know, as the Ojays sing so eloquently, how important family reunions are because, "nobody knows, the next time we see each other, may be years, and years from now."

If ever.

So, while over 10,000 are expected to join Mr. Joyner in Orlando, and some of those have actually planned their reunions around the TJFR, thousands more are making plans for gatherings, small and large.

Whether in Orlando at Disney, Las Vegas or wherever your family decides to gather the family together, the message is not lost.

Family is still important to African Americans.

Tonya B. Lewis contributed to this report.