LEGACY OF CONVICTION

school to be named for Carrollton civilrights crusader

By Melanie Lewis / Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News
Published 03-09-1993
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Annie Heads Rainwater was sick and tired of her children having to ride 60 miles round trip to school.

The youngsters made the trek for just one reason: the color of their skin. But Mrs. Rainwater decided that the tax dollars paid by her black household were just as good as those from white families.

That belief helped end segregation in Carrollton schools in 1964.

Mrs. Rainwater died in September, but her legacy will not be forgotten: A new elementary school has been named in her honor.

The Carrollton-Farmers Branch school board voted last month to name the school, under construction at Frankford and McCoy roads, after the civil rights crusader and homemaker.

The school, scheduled to open in 1994, is the district's first to be named for an African-American.

"There wasn't even another choice,' said trustee June Thompson, who headed the naming committee. "It was a unanimous decision.'

It wasn't so easy when Mrs. Rainwater broached the subject of integration with the school board in the early 1960s.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court had made its historic ruling against school segregation nearly a decade before, Texas law prohibited race mixing in schools. So the trustees had legal grounds to reject Mrs. Rainwater's request that her two teen-age daughters be allowed to attend R.L. Turner High School.
"There was no black high school in Carrollton,' remembers daughter Betty Kelly, who was 12 at the time. Ms. Kelly was finishing her eighth-grade year at the only black elementary school in Carrollton.

The family's connection with local schools runs deep: Mrs. Rainwater's father donated land for the first black elementary school in the city, in 1919.

No one, however, had ever provided for African-Americans who wanted to continue their education. Those who didn't drop out were sent into Dallas to attend Booker T. Washington, the closest black high school.

But as it became overcrowded, the Dallas district shut the door to outsiders. Students had to look elsewhere for education.

"There was a choice between Denton and Irving, but Irving didn't have much to offer,' Ms. Kelly said.

The family chose the Denton district, but it, too, had problems.

"It really disturbed my mom because we had to go so far,' Ms. Kelly said.

And then one day the bus broke down.

Nancy Rainwater, then 16, called her mother to tell her that the driver had left the students on the side of the road. The indignity was too much for Mrs. Rainwater.

It was then that she asked that black youngsters be allowed to attend Carrollton schools.

"The board couldn't say yes, because it was against state law,' Ms. Thompson said.

To make sure that school districts didn't violate the prohibition, a statute allowed the state to cut off education money to districts that desegregated.

But Mrs. Rainwater didn't take no for an answer. She and another family sued the school district.

"She started to get threatening letters and calls,' said Mrs. Rainwater's son, Willie, who was older and never got to attend Carrollton schools. "But she wasn't afraid. She talked about having faith in God.'

The families prevailed in 1964 when U.S. District Judge Sarah T.
Hughes of Dallas ruled in their favor.

The judge accepted a desegregation plan from the district that allowed blacks to attend the high school and, the next year, the lower grades as well.

"We were nervous about what would happen when it started because of all the anger we were seeing elsewhere,' Ms. Thompson remembers. "But there was no outcry from the community.'

The new school recognizes not only Mrs. Rainwater's work but also her status as a member of one of the pioneering African-American families in Carrollton.

"This is showing that they want to give everyone a chance,' Mr. Rainwater said. "It's showing a love.'

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school to be named for Carrollton civilrights crusader., 03-09-1993, pp 13A.

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