

# Special woman aids those with special needs

**BY MARK HOLMBERG**

TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

**T**here's something about 80-year-old Geraldine Story that makes you sit up straight and pay attention.

"Every time she walks into a room, I feel like I'm in grade school," said Doug Payne with the Greater Richmond Association for Retarded Citizens, an organization Mrs. Story has helped shape for the past 30 years.

It's that rare aura of polished gentility that has made this lifelong Richmonder—recently named a YWCA Outstanding Woman—a steady and influential figure in the fight for those with special needs.

It helped her hurdle color barriers that stood in the way of her education, and in the way of her disabled son's health and happiness.

Joyce Ann Hann, board chairwoman for the Greater Richmond ARC, recalls lunching with Mrs. Story at a downtown restaurant. As they entered, three acquaintances stood to greet her royally, Hann recalled. "It was like being with a visiting dignitary."

And yet, Hann added, "she's very unassuming. She doesn't make a big deal, she doesn't demand the center of the attention. She listens—she doesn't miss a thing. She always makes sense."

Mrs. Story has had to be that way.

Most of us know the history of discrimination; the often-substandard schools and opportunities for blacks. Geraldine Story negotiated that, eventually becoming what is believed to be the first African-American to earn a master's degree in business from Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University), where she later became an adjunct professor.

During her years as an educator and administrator, she helped Richmond students excel before and after desegregation.

Mrs. Story and her two sisters were raised by parents who didn't put much stock in excuses. (Her sisters were previously named YWCA Outstanding Women for their work in communication and education.)



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Their father, Charles E. Byrd, was maitre'd at The Jefferson Hotel. Their mother, Lena Dickens Byrd, was a hairdresser who became one of the first female insurance agents for North Carolina Mutual Insurance Co.

"They worked very hard to put us through school," Mrs. Story recalled.

She attended Armstrong High School, then Virginia Union University. She married John R. Story, whom she had met at Armstrong. He served in the Army, then worked at the post office. (He died in 1996.)

Their first child, John Jr., was injured during birth 57 years ago.

The Storys were devastated. "We went to doctor after doctor to find a solution," she recalled.

There was no medical answer. Their son was mentally retarded. (Mrs. Story is not one to shy from the term. As Hann points out, "Mental retardation is a fact, it's not an accusation.")

"You move on and try to deal with it," Mrs. Story said.

She and her husband searched for ways to optimize their son's development.

"There were no programs for children of color" in Richmond, she said.

They found they had some neighbors who also had disabled children, and they went to work pioneering services for public school students of color who were classified as "trainable."

Once those training facilities were established, John Story Sr. would drive his son and the other students to those centers, Mrs. Story recalled.

When John Jr. outgrew the Richmond Public School training centers, Mrs. Story became involved



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**Geraldine Story, shown with her son, John Jr., was recently named a YWCA Outstanding Woman.**

in the integration of the Greater Richmond ARC.

She's been on ARC's board since 1975 and continues to serve on two leadership committees. She has lobbied and testified before the General Assembly.

ARC, she said, is "like an oasis in the desert for our precious people and the families who have to cope."

From 1992 to 1995, she also served on the mayor's commission for the disabled. She served as a trustee for SPECTRAN services in the early '80s, a key time in the development of transportation for the disabled.

Her son John continues to work in ARC's Civitan Vocational Services, which provides in-house, supervised work.

"It makes my heart sing," Mrs. Story said. "He's just so filled with this program."

John's not much of a talker. He's a smiler, and a hugger.

The Storys' other children, Charles I. Story and Rhonda S. Brandon, are business executives.

Mrs. Story said she isn't finished. She has plans to help advance ARC's mission to brighten lives.

Which means more people will likely sit up straighter as they meet this woman who challenges adversity with dignity. ■