Lifestyles: Pokemon popping up everywhere in city.

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Diving into Delta

Ex-bishop champion of civil rights

By KATHRYN EASTBURN
Staff Writer

The Rt. Rev. Duncan Montgomery Gray Jr., 88, retired bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi, died on Friday at his home in Jackson following a brief illness. Known as a moral leader in the civil rights movement in Mississippi, Gray was the son of an Episcopal bishop and the grandfather of Greenwood Church of the Nativity's current pastor, the Rev. Peter Gray.

Visitation will be held from 5 to 7 p.m. Monday at St. Andrew's Cathedral in Jackson, and another visitation will be held from noon to 2 p.m. Tuesday. The funeral will follow at 2 p.m., also at St. Andrew's, and burial will be in Canton.

Duncan Montgomery Gray Jr. was born in Canton on Sept. 21, 1928 and attended Greenwood High School for three years before graduating in 1944 from Jackson's Central High School. He served in the Navy and afterward studied at Tulane. He married Ruth Spivey of Canton in 1948, the same year he received his bachelor's degree. He received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Sewanee: The University of the South in 1953, followed by a long career in the church in Mississippi. In 1972 he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Sewanee.

Gray was the seventh bishop of Mississippi, serving from 1974 to 1996. His father, the Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray Sr., had been the fifth bishop, and one of his sons, the Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray III, was the ninth.

Weeklong course immerses teachers in area’s history, culture

Simeon Wright examines the 1956 Look magazine story in which Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam confessed in detail to abducting and murdering Emmett Till in 1955.
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On a rain-washed July day in the Mississippi Delta, a large bus filled with school teachers from across America criss-crossed the fertile alluvial plain from Cleveland to Mound Bayou to Sumner. These teachers comprised the second class this summer of Delta State University’s weeklong immersion course into all things Delta, part of the National Endowment for the Arts’ Summer Programs in the Humanities for School and College Educators.

The purpose is to learn about the blues, race relations in the South, the civil rights movement in Mississippi, food, art and Delta culture, all in one big, rich gumbo of learning.

Ann Bienvenue of Lowell High School in the historic American industrial town of Lowell, Massachusetts, arrived last Sunday and said she has loved every minute.

Dressed in orange from head to toe, Bienvenue said she plans to take what she learned at this seminar, “The Most Southern Place on Earth,” and combine it into a course she already teaches on the role of American rivers in industrial, commercial and cultural history.

“Lowell, of course, is on the Merrimack River, and I took another NEH course on the Hudson,” she said. “Now I can add the Mississippi River and the Delta to the course, based on what I’ve learned here this week.”

Each summer, the NEH offers tuition-free workshops like this one at Delta State through their Landmarks in American History and Culture program, giving teachers the opportunity to study a wide variety of humanitarian topics. Generous stipends help cover expenses for the one- to five-week programs at learning institutions across America.

Delta State saw one group...
Delta

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complete their one-week "Most Southern Flora" course on June 23, then ushered in this group last week.

"We have 36 teachers from 21 states here," said Dr. Roland Heuss, director of the program. They are all K-12 teachers and were chosen from between 900 applicants.

The Delta immersions experience promises teachers that, in a week's time, they will come to see the Delta as "a microcosm of America," a place of paradox, contrasts, inexpressible history and unique bounty.

On Thursday, the class focused on the rural American tale of Emmett Till 1955 murder in Money and the avalanche of civil rights and legal history it set off.

The first stop of the afternoon was Summer. Brilliant pink crepe myrtle bloomed against the gray stone former Tallas- satchie Courthouse, where Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, the men accused of murdering Till, were found not guilty by an all-white jury in just 30 minutes of deliberation.

Less than a year later, Bryant and Milam were administered their true test: Look magazine in a detailed, impartial report of the murder. The men were never convicted and now are both deceased.

Across the street, a repurposed storefront houses the Emmett Till Interpretive Center, where groups of school children and other visitors come to hear first-hand accounts of the history of the Till murder and trial.

John Vernon, the Center's director, and came as part of a process started by black legislators in 2006 and presented by the Emmett Till Interpretive Center and the Mississippi Civil Rights Coalition of the University of Mississippi, where he holds a degree.

As Vernon welcomed the students gathered in the former Tallasatchie Courthouse, restored to the way it looked when the Till trial happened in 1955, the courthouse stands as a plain lesson in history in Tallasatchie County and was restored as an act of reparative justice.

"It's part of a truth telling effort," said Vernon. "The Emmett Till Memorial Commission was formed to address the injustice and the murders were let go, in the Tallasatchie Courthouse. Stop one in reconsideration is to tell the truth, to prevent this from happening again."

Four people sat at the front of the courtroom, two black and two white. Stephanie Wheeler Parker of Illinois was Till's childhood friend who brought him along to Mississippi to visit family in 1955. Simmie Wright Parker, Parker's uncle, was the Beyat store in Money where Till is said to have been last seen. Carolyn Bryant, and was staring a boy with Till at home when Till was dragged away in the middle of the night.

FBI agent Dale Kirk of Washington investigated the Till case when it was re-opened in 1954. Retired FBI agent Lott Ice, a native of Summit, visited Kilgore in that history investigation.

The four explained how after Bryant and Milam were arrested 50 years passed before Wright and Parker, eyewitnesses to the event at Beyat store in Money and Till was captured in the middle of the night, were asked if they were going to jail for their stories. The FBI took the stories of Till bodily by barge until the activities of the Till commission and the FBI brought it back into the spotlight.

Kevin Means, a 10th-grade teacher at Experiential Learning School in Grafton, Vermont, came forward to share his story of Till, so vividly taught here to the African-American students he teaches in New York.

"It is a regular public school of 250 students," he said. "But these different languages are spoken there: it's really a United Nations of a high school." Ninety-six percent of the school's student body is African-American, and many of them, who speak English as their second language, go to college like Skidmore, Brandeis and Wellesley and Mississippi State.

Means and "mournfully in the culture of the Delta," he explained. He has a profound respect for Till and the story he tells. He plans to bring the blue into his class two days a week. He wants to see the connection between the Delta's native music and the national civil rights history.

When the Till case was re-opened in 2004, then District Attorney Joyce Chiels of the Mississippi District Attorney's office presented the case to the grand jury that decided not to prosecute. Chiels is now attorney for the Leflore County Board of Supervisors.

Despite the decision not to take the case to trial, a lot of important information was uncovered, Killinger and the others agreed, including evidence that showed Milam and Bryant did not act alone.

A student asked how, in the largely African-American school where she teaches, she didn't know what to say to young black men about the current state of race relations.

Killinger said his father married his wife in 1968 and that Till died the cotton gin fun to Till and dropped his body into the water of Black Bayou, not the main body of the Tallahatchie River as popular history has taught. He has told this story many times, and this time, didn't flinch at the harsh truth he was telling.

"This site is holy ground," he said. "If you had been there, you would have helped us." When asked if Till was ever shown to him during his time in Mississippi, Killinger said, "No, he was never shown to me."

"When they took Emmett from his father's house, Simmie Wright Parker was there. They showed him to him," Parker said. "They couldn't call the sheriff because they were black. Point out to your students how that's different now."

Killinger explained how the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act of 2003 was passed in law in 2008, opened the door for 400 more cases.

The session ended and students lined up to have their photos made with civil rights heroes whose names most had never heard.

The next stop was the Village of Glendora, site of J.W. Milam's house, birthplace of Glen- dorian legend Sonney Boy Williamson and home of the recently opened Emmett Till Museum in a restored cotton gin.

In typical Delta fashion, among the crumblin' shade and recollections of civil rights heroes and of historic markers, thought of a small church across a farm field, framed in shades of green, created an idyllic backdrop.

Collette Barron is a 7th grader at Anudson Public School and a great-granddaughter of Sonney Boy Williamson.

The school is the site of a historic marker created in 1999 by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, which states, "The site is located across from the church and is near the cotton gin where Sonney Boy Williamson was murdered on Mississippi Boulevard." Sonney Boy Williamson was shot and killed on this site on July 30, 1955.

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