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Harriet Jackson Scarupa

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CELESTINE CHEEK

Sharing the Dreams

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“There are nights that you sit up just listening — sometimes until 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning.”

—Celestine Cheek



By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Celestine Williams Cheek was born and raised in the small North Carolina town of Newton Grove, N.C., one of 13 children of a farmer and a housewife who was known as "the mother of the church."

She attended Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., majoring in French and English, with an eye toward a teaching career. It was at Shaw that she met the young man who was to become her husband of 35 years, James Edward Cheek.

Impressed by his eloquence at a prayer meeting, she was sure that he was destined to pastor a great church some day. But the path of her eloquent fellow student was to lead elsewhere and Celestine Williams Cheek was to be a strong and supportive partner on that journey.

Along the way, she was able to have experiences that she never imagined as a child growing up in the rural South. She has met presidents of the United States; entertained heads of state from Africa and the Caribbean; traveled to Egypt, Senegal, the Soviet Union, Japan, Taiwan, Iran, Greece, Mexico and throughout the Caribbean; met some of the most celebrated scholars, entertainers and leaders of the day.

And she, of course, has been able to get a first-hand view of the development of the nation's premier predominantly Black university over the past 20 years.

Asked in a recent interview if she felt that she has been an eyewitness to history, she answers, "Oh, yes, very much so. In fact the whole 20 years at Howard were history-in-the-making and that's the reason we are happy now because we know that history has been written—whether it's recorded or not, it's there."

The word "we" comes easily on the lips of Celestine Cheek. For she has

been a crucial figure—if not *the* crucial figure—in assisting James Cheek pursue his dreams. And most of the decisions he has made in his career, she says, were joint decisions.

Consider the following revelation: "He [Cheek] had a minister in Greensboro whom I met just before we got married and the minister told him that he would become president of a university. And so I guess from then on we started preparing because when he was getting his [Master of Divinity] degree at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School and had already planned to go for his doctorate, his church wanted to hire him. And we discussed it and I told him that if he went to work for his church then that would mean that he would get so busy that he would not be able to go and get his doctoral degree. And we didn't want that. We wanted him to continue his education. So he turned his church down and went off to Drew University to get his doctorate."

A gracious, unpretentious woman with a ready smile, Celestine Cheek was speaking in the well-appointed living room of the family home on upper 16th Street in Washington, D.C. As she spoke, through the open kitchen door one could glimpse a scene few Howardites could imagine, much less believe: James E. Cheek, a dark butcher-style apron atop his clothes, bustling around the kitchen as he prepared his lunch.

Many Howardites know Celestine Cheek as the fashionable attractive woman who is introduced by her husband at convocation and graduation exercises or who stands by his side at any number of official receptions. But there is nothing ornamental about the role she has played in her husband's life. And she is very much her own person.

Following her graduation from Shaw in 1953 and her marriage that same year,

she taught school for eight years, first in Fort Barnswell, N.C., then in Rochester, N.Y., Elizabeth, N.J., and Richmond, Va. In Richmond, where Cheek was teaching at Virginia Union University, the couple's first child, James Jr. ("Jimmy"), was born. She had a baby-sitter for one year and continued to teach but when she became pregnant with the couple's second child, Janet, she opted to stay at home.

She has no regrets about this decision and points with pride to the fact that during her many years as a university president's wife, "I never had what you call a nanny. I always took care of my children myself. I never had a cook. I always cooked my meals. I never had anyone to shop for my food. I do my own shopping." And she relishes such domestic arts as tending flowers and making and designing clothes.

Nor does she have any regrets about putting her own career on hold in order to help advance that of her husband. "I have no regrets, no regrets at all," she says. "Because it was my choice. I would do it again if I had to."

In an age when so many women are trying to do it all, those who opt for the traditional helpmate role are often unappreciated outside their immediate families. As Celestine Cheek says with a laugh, "As many hours are spent helping as the mate spends doing, but, you're right, that role isn't really appreciated. When people see the spouse with her husband it seems that she's just there, that all she had to do was get dressed and go with him and sit with him, or whatever. You don't see all the things that are done behind the scene."

Some of these things are ostensibly very simple: like listening. "There are nights that you sit up just listening—sometimes until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning," she says. Other things are far



The Cheek family, 1969.

more complex, such as arranging a dinner for 300 people, which involves "an awful lot of planning and an awful lot of hard work" so that everything runs smoothly.

Through the years, too, she has been active as a volunteer, serving as chairman of the executive board of the Cynthia Warner School, when her children were enrolled there; as a member of the women's committee of the Washington Performing Arts Society; as a member of the Jack and Jills; and as a member of the board of the YWCA-National Capital Area.

She also has worked with the D.C. Public Schools, Operation Rescue Program, tutoring students at an elementary school in the Anacostia section of the

city, and is currently helping to organize the D.C. Public Schools' Children's Fund, which she describes as "an organization to work with four-year-olds of single parents to get the children ready for school and [making a contribution to] society." "We're trying to reach them early," she adds, "so they will believe in themselves."

Her motivation for such community involvements, she believes, goes back to her own childhood. "My mother was called 'the mother of the church' and my father was a deacon in the church," she recalls. "In addition to having 13 children, my mother was considered like a community cook. She was an excellent cook and would prepare these huge meals on Sunday and often another fam-

ily would come and join us for Sunday dinner. She always had food enough for other people and we always seemed to have someone else in the house."

Her own children opted to attend Howard. Jimmy, now 27, graduated from Howard with a degree in English and psychology. He had transferred to Howard after spending three years at Morehouse College. After his graduation, he studied in Egypt at The American University in Cairo for two years on an ITT International Fellowship, spent a year at Harvard Law School and is now taking a break from those studies to get some practical experience working in a D.C. law firm. Janet, now 25, received a degree in chemistry from the university and is now taking some additional science

courses in preparation for applying to medical school.

Explaining her children's college choices, she says, "They felt they could get as good an education at a Black school—Howard or Morehouse or whatever—as they could at a white school, plus the social aspect was better. And that wasn't [consciously] because of our influence. The decision was their own."

It wasn't always easy for the two Cheek children, though, to be attending the school where their father was the president. "Our daughter, her freshman year, just thought that she had to solve everyone's problems," Celestine Cheek says, hovering between a sigh and an affectionate laugh. "She was on the phone all night going through the night calling her daddy about this problem this person was having, this problem that person was having and he, in turn, would call other people. She really felt that it was her university and she would try to solve all the problems to the point that it really affected her and I think affected her grades."

That didn't change until Janet spent a year at Duke University on an exchange program, her mother recalls. "Then she said, 'Mom, I'm so happy that I went away and I could see that I'm not supposed to be taking care of all these problems. When I come back I'll just take care of my own and get out of school and that will be it.'"

Asked if her children received any special treatment at Howard because of who their father was, she answers, "Oh, no, no, no. It was more the other way around I think. Even in classes like swimming if they were singled out it wasn't in a positive kind of way. They felt it was in a negative way."

Asked, then, if her children had any second thought about attending Howard, she answers, "Oh, not at all. They love

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Howard as much as we do."

As Celestine Cheek looks back, she acknowledges she will miss Howard. (The Cheeks will be based in Washington and plan to remain in the same house, she says.) "I'll miss everything. I'll miss the camaraderie, the people."

Asked to list some of the high points of the last 20 years, she cites "our coming here;" Cheek's inauguration; "our children growing up and entering Howard and graduating from Howard;" Cheek's working with different presidents at the White House.

"The greatest thing, though, was his accomplishments," she says of her husband. "When he came here as a young man he had all of these ambitions and things that he wanted to do for the university. He accomplished all of those things, plus he started others. Very few

people accomplish everything that they plan to do—plus. And we are very happy about that."

As for the low points of the couple's 20-year experience at Howard, she cites student uprisings. "That's always a low point—when you've got a lot of dissension among the students, whether it's valid or not. We feel that a university is for the students and my husband always has done everything that he could to make it best for the students. They don't always agree; but he has."

Some of her other views:

On the ingredients of a long lasting marriage: "A lot of patience, a lot of patience, a lot of patience; a lot of giving—you have to give and take but I think more giving than taking; respect; and love."

On James Cheek as father: "With other people he's very serious and straightforward, but with the children he's a softie. They get just about everything they want from him. I'm the one to say, 'No.' I was the disciplinarian."

On her husband's decision to retire: "We knew that he was very exhausted. We both were. We've spent 26 years as presidents of universities and if you take 18 and 20 hours a day it's almost 40 years. So we knew that it was time for us to rest."

After a period of rest and perhaps some leisurely travel, if there is to be an ambassadorial post in the Cheeks' future, Celestine Cheek will be ready. "One thing," she says with a laugh, "I've done entertaining all my life. I've done it at Shaw, at Howard. I did it with my mother." □