Beth Madison Howse

Crystal deGregory

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/conference-on-african-american-history-and-culture

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at Digital Scholarship @ Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship @ Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact XGE@Tnstate.edu.
Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee

Beth Madison Howse

Over the course of her more than four-decade long career, legendary librarian and archivist Beth Madison Howse was the oracle of the Fisk University Special Collections and Archives. Encouraging them with the sweetness of her spirit and smile, she undergirded scores of researchers with her mastery of archival knowledge and African-American history.

Beth Irene Madison was born on September 24, 1943 to Archie and Daile Madison, Sr. Her parents doted on her and soon after welcomed a sister, Gail and brother, Archie, Jr. into the family. Being a big sister was a role Beth assumed with all the loving kindness a little girl could muster, especially after the untimely death of her father when she and her siblings were young children. With the help of their Uncle Bud, her mother Daile reared Beth along with her sister and brother at 1034 17th Avenue North in the home of her maternal grandmother Mother Moore, beloved longtime dorm director at Fisk University.

Growing up in the shadow of the historic Fisk Jubilee Hall, the Madison children attended Nashville’s public schools and enjoyed a wonderful childhood in the environs of the Fisk campus at the height of its golden years. The Madison family were members of the Fisk Memorial Chapel, and now-famous luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance period were the parents of their childhood friends. Poet and librarian Arna Bontemps lived a few streets over, while artist Aaron Douglas lived just two doors down; the famous musicologist John W. Work III was her family’s next door neighbor.

Beth Madison graduated from Nashville’s renowned Pearl High School in 1961 and she entered Fisk University that fall amid the burgeoning modern Civil Rights Movement. Her choice to attend Fisk was unsurprising; her familial relationship to Fisk, had, even by that time, stretched almost a century. Her maternal great-grandmother Ella Sheppard Moore entered Fisk as a student in 1868, and was one of nine singers that formed the original Fisk Jubilee Singers troupe that departed on October 6, 1871 to raise money to save the school. As pianist and assistant director for the singers, Sheppard Moore was the most-recognizable and longest-serving member of the group which introduced spirituals to the world, and provided funding to erect Jubilee Hall as the first permanent structure for the education of blacks in the South.

From the time she was a teenager, Beth Madison had dutifully represented her family every year at Jubilee Day, a tradition that she continued throughout her life. A fourth generation Fiskite, she excelled at Fisk, graduating with her bachelor’s degree in 1965 before later attending Peabody College, from which she was awarded a master’s degree. She married Wilfred B. Howse in July 1964, and together, they began a family that included two sons, Bryan and Scott, and one daughter, Bethany.

In 1970, Beth Howse returned to work at her alma mater Fisk University; and five years later began her career as a Special Collections Librarian in the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, under the tutelage of Ann Allen Shockley, whom she succeeded. Beth thrived in her role as the caretaker of priceless Fiskiana and African-American archival materials. She took special pride in painstakingly processing a number of Fisk’s more than one hundred processed collections including the Fisk Jubilee Singers Collections. She was never too busy to help...
researchers, whether student, novice, or expert, reach their highest heights. In recognition of her tireless work, countless local, national and international authors have recognized the debt they owe to her as both a professional and as an enthusiast in their book’s acknowledgements.

During her summers, Howse nurtured scores of children over her more than three decade-long tenure as director of Fisk Mini-College, a summer enrichment program for children aged 7 to 12. With classes offered in math, music, art, literature, African American History, speech, drama, dance as well as the history of Fisk and Nashville, hundreds of children were exposed to campus life at Fisk. The summer prior to Howse’s passing, more than fifty children were the beneficiaries of her unfailing commitment to the program. Their young voices could be heard gleefully squealing her name as they competed to be the center of her attention.

For more than thirty years, Beth also served as archivist for Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated (Boule). She also enjoyed helping members of the wider community including the Girl Scouts, with whom she helped to create the curricula for a Jubilee Singers patch. For several decades, she was also a faithful member of the Howard Congregational Church where her great-grandfather the Reverend George W. Moore had once been a minister.

Above all, Beth was a loving family person and a faithful friend. She was an avid reader, loved turtles, enjoyed cooking and was devoted to her sister Gail. Beth died of leukemia on September 26, 2012, after an almost two-year battle with myelodysplastic syndrome.

Crystal deGregory