

# Paper Bag of Nails and a Hammer in her Hand: *The Life and Legacy of Overseer R. L. Braziel*

*By Travis Braziel*



*Overseer R. L. Braziel at the fifty-fourth anniversary of The Lord Jesus Christ Holiness Church, which she founded in Sunnyside.*

All photos courtesy of author.

On November 9, 2005, Ruby Lee Braziel, my grandmother, suffered a mild stroke in her home and was rushed to Houston's St. Luke's Hospital. When I returned home from school, my father, Darwin Allen Sr., told me what had happened – sad news that any grandson would hate to hear. Several thoughts flooded my mind at once. Why on my birthday of all days? What would happen to my grandmother's church now that her ability to pastor had been altered? More importantly, why had it not occurred to me that she was just as human as anyone else?

My sense of urgency to get to the hospital grew by the minute. I soon learned that my parents had long thought about many of my fears and questions. What I saw as a day that stood still in time simultaneously beckoned a long-awaited transition. Many church-goers recognized this simply as "God's will." Once my family and I arrived at St. Luke's, we found my grandmother in mild discomfort but alert and resting. Although she was aware of what had happened, the mild stroke did not restrain my grandmother from encouraging others who tried to out-encourage her.

I decided that I would not join my peers at Lamar High School for the speech and debate tournament that weekend in Harlingen, Texas, or so I thought. My efforts to explain such a presumptuous decision to my grandmother were futile. She essentially said that she did not raise any of her grandchildren to bail out when life got tough and that I should see all my commitments to their fruition. Amazed at such wisdom, I obeyed.

That semester I was a freshman at Lamar in River Oaks, which was unlike anything in my grandmother's experience as a young African American woman working in Houston. A couple of months before her stroke, she drove me to Lamar for the first and last time. I had missed the school bus, and my grandmother, then seventy-seven years old, drove me to River Oaks from Sunnyside, a predominantly black neighborhood in Southeast Houston. She marveled over how much Houston, and particularly River Oaks, had changed. During the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, she worked as a housemaid for a wealthy white family in River Oaks, Houston's most affluent neighborhood. It probably had not occurred to her under the oppression of Jim Crow, which civil rights activism had yet to reverse, that her descendants would one day attend Lamar, then an all-white school under the separate but equal rule.

Before our arrival at Lamar, we got lost temporarily on San Jacinto Street, clueless that Lamar stood only a short distance away. My grandmother knew the area

well, but dementia interfered with her recollection. It did not occur to me then that Alzheimer's had crept into her memory the same way it had her mother's. Once we arrived, I thanked her and asked if she would be fine driving home.

Before I dashed to class, I sat there for several minutes gazing and smiling at my grandmother. We had almost returned home during our search, but by God's grace we made it. Observing my grandmother closely, I noticed that she had something on her mind. It probably had to do with River Oaks, her youth, the struggle for equality as a woman and an African American, Lamar High School, and the weight of her ministry. It also involved seeing her grandson enjoying the privileges of the twenty-first century and the need for me to learn the hard way to find my own identity, pioneer my own frontier, and understand the consequences of her legacy. Those five minutes were a snapshot of her life, and I was too young, ignorant, and untested to fully comprehend the moment—a moment that started in the summer of 1928.

Juanita Wells gave birth to Ruby Breedlove on August 12, 1928, in Navasota, Texas. Ruby grew up Catholic and attended the Navasota schools until the eighth grade when work and moving to Houston took priority over finishing school. Ruby's era, characterized by intense racism, defined her, as it did many people. In addition, at age thirteen, she witnessed the U.S. entry into World War II.

According to my mother, Pamela Braziel-Allen, my grandmother met my grandfather, William C. Braziel, in Houston's Fifth Ward in the mid-1940s. He was from Waco, Texas, and four years older than her. Ruby had lovely caramel brown skin, and William had handsome, dark, ebony skin. Their story was a classic among many love stories of the Second World War—a soldier came home from the war, and the ladies gazed upon him with honor, excitement, and romanticism.<sup>1</sup>

Ruby and William had moved to Houston for purely social and economic reasons. Both had family there, and Houston was a booming city with employment opportunities during and after the war. While on Army duty, my grandfather wrote letters to his sweetheart. After the war, William Braziel and Ruby Breedlove united in holy matrimony and, in the late 1940s, gave birth to two sons, Charles and William Jr. My grandmother was eighteen years of age and my grandfather was twenty-two.

My grandmother's life took a dramatic and positive turn in the early 1950s when she "heard the Christian gospel preached in a way that she [had] never experi-



*Overseer Ruby L. Braziel in 1984.*

enced" before that time. My mother explained that when my grandparents and great-grandmother, Juanita Wells, moved to Houston they decided to join the Baptist faith. Although my grandmother's ancestors had built the first black Catholic church in Navasota, she subconsciously thirsted for something greater within Christendom. That thirst was quenched in the Holiness Movement, also known as the Pentecostal Charismatic wave or experience, which swept the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. The Holiness Church and Pentecostals, unlike the Catholics and Baptists in that era, believed in the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, miracles, divine healing, speaking in tongues, and boisterous praise and worship to God.

The man responsible for her spiritual rebirth was Bishop Augustus Bonds, a classical holiness preacher born in the early 1890s. One day, a friend of my grandmother's began expounding on Bond's deliverance preaching and evangelism, and encouraged her to attend his meeting. She heeded her friend's advice and was struck enthusiastic by Bishop Bond's charismatic preaching, demonstration of the Spirit, magnetic personality, and gift for drawing hundreds to his open-air and tent meetings. She had witnessed this bishop cast unclean spirits out of men, make the lame walk, cause the mute to talk, utter accurate words of prophecy, and preach godliness in no-nonsense fashion compared to other black Houston clergymen at the time. Before attending her first service under Bishop Bonds, my grandmother had contemplated divorcing my grandfather and taking her sons and mother to live with her older half-sister in Los Angeles. But, when Bishop Bonds began to preach on divorce and remarriage, my grandmother decided that she had no choice but to give her life to Jesus Christ if she intended to continue in her marriage, and she did.

Immediately after her salvation, Ruby Braziel zealously committed her life to God. She joined Bishop Bonds's church, God's Holy Tabernacle, located in the Fifth Ward, and became an active participant in the Willing Workers, a choir and altar workers group dedicated to worship, evangelism, and prayer. Ruby quickly became a missionary, began leading congregational services, and preached the gospel when the opportunity arose. As her gift for the ministry became evident, Bishop Bonds sent her out in the office of Evangelist to hold revivals in Louisiana. Missionary Braziel had become a rising star at God's Holy Tabernacle, but her mission from God soon created a conflict with her bishop.

Ruby Braziel firmly believed in the divorce and re-marriage doctrine as taught by her bishop stating that God designed marriage to be between one husband and one wife until death nullifies the marriage. When Bishop Bonds decided to remarry, Braziel took a leave of absence from God's Holy Tabernacle that lasted three months. By this time, she had long moved from the Fifth Ward to Sunnyside in Southeast Houston.

My grandmother rehashed this incident with me on several occasions. Although Bishop Bonds eventually admitted that his remarriage was an error, it did not give Braziel a moral license to leave his church. Braziel returned to God's Holy Tabernacle and submitted herself to her bishop. Missionary Braziel sat under Bishop Bonds for three additional years when God spoke to him to send his spiritual daughter to Sunnyside to establish a work for God, which ultimately made her one of the first women pastors in Houston.

My grandmother's generation is a remarkable one. Just as she emerged in Houston during the 1950s, so did Pastor John Osteen of Lakewood Church and Reverend William "Bill" Lawson. John Osteen gave his life to Christ at the age of seventeen in 1939 in Fort Worth, Texas. Osteen's ministry eventually compelled him to relocate to Houston in the 1950s and pastor Lakewood, originally a Southern Baptist turned charismatic, non-denominational church. In 1958, he was baptized in the Holy Spirit and experienced the sensation of speaking in diverse spiritual tongues. Already pastoring, this experience inspired Osteen to seek a deeper experience with God and cemented his growing belief in miraculous healing following his daughter Lisa's recovery from "seemingly insurmountable health problems." Pastor Osteen is revered today as one of the foremost faith healers of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

Reverend William Lawson, of Kansas City, Missouri, arrived in Houston in August 1955. Reverend Lawson founded the Baptist Student Union at Texas Southern University and, seven years later, established Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. Like Osteen and Braziel, Lawson is an icon in Houston's Christian community.<sup>3</sup> John Osteen and R. L. Braziel had the pleasure of meeting each other once, and my mother is well acquainted with Reverend Lawson (now pastor emeritus) and Reverend Marcus Cosby, the current senior pastor of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church.

R. L. Braziel admired the national ministries of faith healers and televangelists like Oral Roberts and Kathryn Kuhlman. Roberts was one of the foremost representatives of the healing and miracles ministry that my grandmother soon identified as her trademark.<sup>4</sup> Kuhlman played a pivotal role for two reasons: she became one of the first national women preachers to break the glass ceiling; secondly, she was revered on the same level as Roberts in working miracles and divine healing.

Although Kuhlman preferred not to be called a preacher because she believed preaching and pastoring was a man's role, she nevertheless preached the gospel as



*Minister Erma Holmes and Brother Travis Braziel at the church's fifty-fourth anniversary service.*

a handmaiden of the Lord.<sup>5</sup> In truth, Kuhlman's preaching made her a preacher, regardless of what she called herself. After claiming not to be an evangelist in her earlier ministry, she admitted in her later years that it was an ecclesiastical office that God ordained for her to spread the gospel.

One Sunday morning in the 1950s, Bishop Bonds gave a stunning prophecy to the roster of preachers under his bishopric. He waved his hand over the congregation and declared that God would use one of his ministers to do a greater work than he would muster in Houston. In a roster dominated by male preachers, little did Missionary Braziel know that it would be her.

Before William and Ruby Braziel settled in Sunnyside, its "earliest development took place in a somewhat rural setting on a plane in 1912" on the Southside of Houston. The "land platted by H. H. Holmes" eventually "sold to individuals, many of them that built their own homes." My grandparents witnessed the construction of Attucks Middle School (1958), Evan E. Worthing High School (1959), J. R. Reynolds Elementary School (1959), W. L. D. Johnson Branch Library (1964), and several other public facilities in rapid succession.<sup>6</sup> Their first home in Sunnyside, like many others, was built with money they received from the government under the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, or G.I. Bill.

In 1957, Braziel was commissioned by her bishop and commanded by Jesus Christ to build God a true church—The Lord Jesus Christ Holiness Church—which carried His name as the cornerstone of Christianity. Missionary Braziel had to start somewhere, so she walked the streets of Sunnyside with a paper bag of nails and a hammer in her hands. Soon, an acquaintance in the neighborhood gave her a tent and a watermelon stand to use as a podium to hold her first services until she moved them inside her garage. At the dawn of her ministry, Braziel owned a beauty salon, which she operated out of her home, and her first church members, Margaret Montgomery and Addie Williams, happened to be her clientele.

In 1961, the church began construction of its first sanctuary, which opened the following year. From 1962

to 1965, Missionary Braziel held tryouts for male preachers who believed God had called them to pastor The Lord Jesus Christ Holiness Church. Several male pastors, elders, and bishops tried, but none had the divine appointment to pastor the church at 3717 Barberrry. My grandmother had always been the rightful pastor and founder of TLJCHC, but she let male pastors and preachers act as leaders of the work she established. She did this because she understood the social consequences and the kind of reception a woman pastor would receive in a Christian culture where it remained highly taboo for a woman to pastor a church.

At the end of the three-year trial, Missionary Braziel received a divine visitation from Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit who ordered her not to sit under any male preacher or pastor but to take full responsibility of TLJCHC as pastor and overseer, a position comparable to that of a bishop. From then on, Overseer Braziel led the church she had planted with full force. She had finally received her rightful role in Christendom, but opposition soon followed.

In the 1950s and 1960s, being a woman pastor or aspiring to that position remained unpopular. Several male pastors denounced my grandmother as a heretic, and she frequently heard that God did not call women to pastor. Overseer Braziel was denied access to pulpits and deliberately overlooked by many men in Houston's ultra-conservative, black church establishment. Protestors demonstrated across the street from her church, and one of those protestors, according to my mother, was George Foreman, the professional boxer. When many expected my grandmother to retaliate, she did not; she stood firm in her identity and chose love over hate.

In 1956, the United Presbyterian Church voted to ordain women, and the following year Priscilla Chaplin became its first woman pastor. Although Rev. Chaplin broke the Church's traditional barrier, it was not without a struggle. After she finished her bachelor's degree at New York's Union Theological Seminary, several parishes ignored her application to pastor until a 130-member parish in Sauquoit, New York, gave a flicker of hope. Rev. Chaplin and Overseer Braziel's struggle for equality opened the door to greater opportunity for women in the coming generations.<sup>7</sup>

In 1981, Overseer Braziel, with a consistent membership of seventy people, began construction on a second sanctuary a few yards away from the first one on Barberrry Drive. The second building took approximately twelve months to build and opened its doors on the first Sunday of August 1982. It was truly a spectacle: the largest church in the Southside of Houston complete with chandeliers, a balcony, office space, and well-conditioned pews uprooted from a local Catholic church that had moved into a new building. Many marveled, scores of male preachers and pastors became envious, and the black community throughout Houston looked upon Sunnyside with enthusiasm. Bishop Bonds soon realized that his prophecy about a powerful preacher rising to



*Co-pastor Darwin Allen Sr. with Overseer Braziel and Pastor Pamela Braziel-Allen on the pastor's fourth anniversary in the ministry.*

take his mantle was a woman, Overseer Braziel.

Since the start of Overseer Braziel's ministry, her trademark across Houston has been that of a modern-day apostle. Apostles were known for their message of grace and salvation and frequent demonstration of miracles, divine healing, signs, wonders, and the ability to pioneer new territories. Members of The Lord Jesus Christ Holiness Church witnessed Overseer Braziel heal the sick, raise the dead, change countless lives, feed the hungry, and clothe the poor; but most of all, members of TLJCHC experienced a relationship with Jesus Christ in deeper and unimaginable ways.

From 1957 to 2005, Overseer Braziel faithfully preached the gospel. She started her radio ministry in the early 1970s and could be heard live on 1360 AM radio on Saturdays at 2:00 p.m. In 1998, Overseer launched her television ministry and soon after began grooming her daughter, my mother, for the ministry.

In December 2005, a month after Overseer R. L. Braziel's mild stroke, the church announced that Pamela Braziel-Allen would become the next pastor of The Lord Jesus Christ Holiness Church. The following month, my mother was ordained as pastor, and my father became an elder, the head minister, and co-pastor soon after.

Today my grandmother is doing well and is in good spirits. Despite the stroke nearly nine years ago and old age, she is quite mobile, strong in faith, restful, and happily watching the fruits of her labor of love. The work she started half a century ago as founder of TLJCHC runs strong. Under the leadership of Pastor Allen, The Reformer, TLJCHC's membership continues to increase, marriages are flourishing, families are growing stronger, and the auxiliaries are adapting to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.

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