

Dr. Estella Edward Shabazz developed a sense of community growing up in her close knit, 5<sup>th</sup> District neighborhood.

She discovered the value of hard work, education and family through her nurturing parents, Henry and Johnnie Lula Edwards, and her 9 older siblings. She strengthened her faith and found her calling in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. When bused to an unwelcoming Southside school, she learned resilience, leadership, problem solving, and collaboration.

She broke barriers for underrepresented women when she earned a degree in Civil Engineering Technology at Savannah State College in 1983. Shabazz was the fifth woman in the history of the college to do so. She went on to work for the Department of Highways and Public Transportation in Columbia, South Carolina, and in 1986 became the first black woman hired as a City of Savannah Civil Engineer. Ultimately, she operated successful businesses throughout the state of Georgia.

All of these incredible experiences, and the supportive women who helped her along the way, shaped the extraordinary life of Dr. Estella Edward Shabazz and prepared her for community service and leadership.

Some of Shabazz's earliest memories were of the mothers on her block sharing resources, watching out for neighborhood children and working together to make sure their community was safe and strong. "I grew up on the same street I live on now," Shabazz said. "I've always felt like I was home when I turned down my street. It was truly a village. That's how it has been for me for 60 years and that's why I work to honor the ancestors and keep this a place where the quality of life is good." Shabazz grew up in a traditional home with six brothers and three sisters, but very early on her father placed her in the non-traditional role of construction assistant. "My father was always adding on to the house and I was out there helping him work on the roof and put in insulation," she said. "I never had the luxury of learning to cook." Her quiet, comfortable life took an unexpected turn in 1971 when Shabazz was bused to Windsor Forest High School as part of the public school system's federally mandated integration plan. Despite the riots and protests that ensued, she made meaningful connections with supportive teachers and sought out ways for disenfranchised students to engage. She led a group of African American students to further integrate the Chatelaines

drill team, built social and academic bridges, and recruited students to join school clubs.

During these tumultuous times in the community, Shabazz was influenced by other amazing Savannah women, including her 8<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra teacher Mrs. Joyce Davis, who helped build her academic confidence by publicly acknowledging her mathematic talent and highlighting her accomplishments. It was Davis' support and encouragement that inspired Shabazz to pursue careers in male-dominated fields. Rev. Peola W. Scott helped her develop as a public speaker and church leader by selecting her as the only female Youth Day presenter at St. Phillip Monumental A.M.E. Church. Her male counterparts were gifted orators and accomplished young leaders. One of them, John Morse, went on to become a Chatham County Superior Court Judge. But Scott inspired Shabazz. She didn't treat her like the only girl, she was considered one of the church's most talented and inspired youth. "She took me under her wing and helped me write speeches, which I didn't realize at the time were my very first sermons," Shabazz said. Scott was among the church leaders who nurtured Shabazz's talents over the years and encouraged her to answer the call to preach. In 1998 she was elected to the AME Church Leadership Training and Educational Institute for Pastoral Service-The Board of Examiners. She increased her involvement in community and local church leadership and was ordained Deacon and Itinerary Elder in the AME Church. Then in 2003, while raising a family and operating a restaurant, a local newspaper and a transportation business in Savannah and Atlanta, she went to seminary school at Turner Theological Seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta to pursue a Master of Divinity Degree. Everything was going smoothly for Shabazz. Life was comfortable and success seemed to come easy.

Then she started to face pushback and receive discouraging comments from the last place she expected opposition – the church. "I had devoted all of those years and so much time away from my husband and children," Shabazz said. "I had worked so hard only to have some of the male Pastors and Presiding Elders say, 'It's bad enough that you're a woman, but the AME Church will never have a pastor with the last name Shabazz.'" Estella Shabazz is married to Yusuf Shabazz, a community activist, businessman and entrepreneur. Despite the

sexism and unfair treatment, Shabazz remained positive and stayed focused on her goals. Just before graduation from the ITC in 2005, she received a church appointment to pastor the Bethel AME Church in Cylo, Ga. She was efficient and effective as Pastor and grew the membership of the Church. To be closer to her elderly mother, Shabazz became the Assistant Pastor at St. Philip Monumental AME Church, with the permission from the Presiding Elder. Shabazz worked in the church tirelessly as Assistant Pastor until her mother transitioned in 2006. But she expected to be appointed minister of her very own AME church during the April 11, 2008 AME Church's Georgia Annual Conference. She had completed all five required years of AME Church leadership training and the Educational Institute for Pastoral Service-The Board of Examiners. She was the first woman in the 141-year history of the Georgia Annual Conference of the AME Church's 6<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District to be ordained as an itinerant elder with a Master of Divinity Degree. And she had earned the degree from the only AME Church Seminary in the United States. However, Bishop William P. Deveux refused to give Shabazz an appointment.

"All of the pastors at the conference were waiting to see who would be assigned to what church," Shabazz said. "One by one, all the men and a handful of women were assigned a church. I was the only pastor without an appointment and there were six churches still without a pastor. But they ended the conference. They left me standing there, with nothing. The Bishop would not answer my questions about not receiving a church appointment when my husband and I approached him. I walked out hurt and humiliated with my family, but God had a plan."

Shabazz created her own denomination, the New Afrikan Methodist Episcopal Church. After receiving disturbing letters from an AME Church, USA attorney and advise from her attorney, she renamed the denomination the New Afrikan Methodist Christian Church. She serves as founder and chief bishop. Her newspaper business, The Freedom's Journal, published a special edition announcing her accomplishments called The New AME Chronicle. Thousands of copies were passed out at the 48<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the AME Church Worldwide in St. Louis, Missouri in July 2008.

Shabazz started receiving emails, calls and prays of encouragement from around the world pertaining to this issue.

Shabazz had already been accepted to the doctoral program at the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. "I went there extremely wounded," she said. "But it was one of the nation's top seminaries that black pastors and bishops attended. I studied, excelled and healed." When she talks about graduating in 2010, successfully defending her dissertation and all that she went through to earn the title Dr. Estella Shabazz, she weeps. But they are tears of joy and cries of triumph. "I was unshaken and unmovable. Nothing could stand in my way," she said.

Dr. Shabazz advises young women in the community to labor hard and never give up when faced with obstacles. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and of God's righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto us," she said.

One year later, while leaving a community event Rev. Matthew Southall Brown, Sr.- Pastor Emeritus of St. John Baptist Church tapped Shabazz on the shoulder and asked her to run for the Savannah City Council 5<sup>th</sup> District Aldermanic seat. She decided to run after reflecting on the strong Savannah women and other women who had contributed to her success – her mother, her church youth pastor, her high school algebra teacher, her Savannah State College Sciences and Technology Dean Dr. Margaret Robinson, her Army Corps of Engineers internship mentor Joelle James, her personal mentor Dr. Betty D. Sanders Shabazz (wife of Malcolm X) and her political predecessors former State Senator Diana Harvey Johnson and former Mayor Edna Jackson. "It is their shoulders that I stand on," Shabazz said. She won the 5<sup>th</sup> District seat and is now the longest serving Alderwoman on the City of Savannah's majority Black Female City Council. She has been a businesswoman in Savannah for 37 years and is currently serving her third term on Council. She faced no opposition in her last election in November 2019. "Serving on the first majority black female council means we are throwing off the yoke of oppression. We are here because the people went to the polls and chose us," Shabazz said. "We understand the People struggles and we speak for their needs. We put them first and we are taking care of those who have been marginalized."