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# Garner News

*Garner's Original Hometown Paper; A Community Tradition Since 1963*

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GARNER, NC

**In This Edition****COLUMNISTS**

Marti Hall  
Amanda Smith  
J.T. Smith  
John Cate  
Jennifer Staton

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**Eddrena Surles celebrates with her father, Eddie Graham, and mother, Lola Umeh, immediately after Saturday's commencement ceremony. Surles was one of 369 Garner Senior High graduates. (Photo by Amanda B. Smith)**

**They're tops in the Class of '02****Two schools get new principals****Previous articles****GSHS bids farewell to Class of 2002**

Three-hundred sixty-nine members of the Class of 2002 graduated from Garner High School June 1 in a ceremony held at the Raleigh Convention and Conference Center. This year's graduates were more than that Class of 2001, but the good weather did not mask their enthusiasm.

**Dog debate divides board**

For nearly everyone in the room, the dog debate was a discussion item on the agenda for the June 3 town meeting. The item was a discussion item for what the town of Garner should do about the existing two-dog limit for residences of 10,000 square feet or less.

**Waste Management addresses board**

After keeping them waiting for a month, an official of Waste Management finally appeared before the Garner town board Monday night to answer questions about the company's failure to process recyclable materials during a yet-to-be-identified period of time in either 2000 or 2001.

**Taylor reinstated after shooting**



## Remembering the Beginning

By **DR. ROBERT SHEPARD**

*Garner native, and founding executive director of the Science and Engineering Alliance, Inc. (SEA)*

*Editor's Note: Dr. Shepard was contacted by Garner News Associate Editor Amanda Smith after she discovered Shepard's Web page on the Internet. Smith originally planned to write an article about Shepard as part of the newspaper's 'Celebrate National African American History Month' feature, but after discovering that Shepard is writing a book about his life, she decided that Shepard's words should speak for themselves. The following excerpt from Shepard's forthcoming book was printed with the author's permission.*



I was born on Christmas Day in 1947 in Garner. I was the second of seven children born to Verna and Louis Shepard.

My mother, the late Verna Shepard, born, reared, and died in Garner, was a high school graduate who preached to all seven of her children the importance of spiritual growth and development and a solid education. My father, Louis Shepard, was a quiet man who was forced to quit his formal education in the third grade growing up in Snow Hill, because his family sharecropped and he had to work the farm instead of attending school.

I would learn as a young boy that my mother was a leader and my father was a brilliant black man who was not afforded opportunities to show forth his brilliance through normal channels.

I entered first grade at 5 years old in September 1953. Back then, North Carolina law stated that for a child to enter first grade, his 6th birthday must fall on or before Oct. 1 of that year. If the child's 6th birthday did not fall within this timeframe, the child could not enter first grade until the following year.

People often asked mama how was I able to enter first grade at age 5 when my 6th birthday was not until December of 1953? Her patented answer was that "Robert was such a big boy and growing so fast, I had to think of a creative way to get him in and not wait until the following year. He would be too big." Then she would simply say, "I wrote in the entry form that he was 6 when he was really 5."

Therefore, I graduated from high school in the class of 1965.

Mama stressed a lot of things to us while we were growing up. But, the foundational teachings she stressed all the time were:

- \* Keep God at the center of your life;
- \* Get a good education, which meant a college degree;
- \* Leave your hometown if you want to grow and expand your horizon because if Jesus had to leave His own hometown for people to take Him serious, you will certainly have to leave yours as well;
- \* Learn to do an honest day's work if you want to succeed;
- \* Be willing to lend a helping hand to others;
- \* Don't ever think you are better than anyone else;
- \* After you give God His 10 percent first, save something for yourself for a rainy day;

- \* Always maintain integrity and good moral character. Your name is all you've got and it always arrives ahead of you; and
- \* Wherever you go in this world, don't ever stray from your spiritual upbringing.

In the early years of my education, I did not work as hard as required to excel to the fullest of my potential. A lackadaisical attitude toward school continued for the first six years of my education. A life-changing event happened to me at the end of my sixth grade year.

At the start of my seventh grade year, I was placed in an overcrowded classroom that was to be taught by the school's band teacher. It was well known that the band teacher was not too rigorous and was labeled as being easy. In fact, it was known that he preferred conducting band activities over teaching academic classes.

None of the students in the overcrowded class was aware that a new teacher was hired over the summer to relieve the crowded conditions. The principal simply walked into the room on opening day and introduced the new teacher, Mrs. Crenshaw. His statement went like this: "Today, this overcrowded class is going to be split into two classes. Half of you will remain with Mr. Judkins and the other half will go to Mrs. Crenshaw's class. Let me see a show of hands of those who will volunteer to go to Mrs. Crenshaw's class. If there are not enough volunteers, I will randomly pick students to go."

My hand went up. My hand simply went up. It just went up and stayed up. It was in Mrs. Crenshaw's seventh grade class that my life would change academically forever. I developed a love for education like I had never known before. She laid down the law and said "if you did not want to learn, then get up and report to the principal's office right then," and she said she meant it. I had never heard any teacher talk like that at school before. I was shocked. I began to think that the guys were right, and thought that I had made a mistake leaving Mr. Judkins' class. In hindsight, it turned out to be God moving in my life as he had done to this point and would do again in years to come.

From the seventh grade on, I continued to excel for the remainder of my schooling and graduated salutatorian of the class of 1965. In fact, in my junior year I won a first place ribbon in the science fair competition. My project was entitled "Is There a Difference in Gasoline?"

Looking back on it, this project and my high school science teacher, Mr. E.L. Sanders, played big roles in my choosing a career in science.

To conduct the experiments would require that a set of distillation experiments be carried out in the laboratory. My science teacher liked my idea, but said that he would have to check with the principal and probably others to see if gasoline could be brought into a high school chemistry laboratory. It turns out that the matter had to go before school officials at the state or county level. The officials ruled that the experiments could be done in the school laboratory, but would have to be done under supervision of a qualified professional after normal school hours. My teacher brought this information back to me with a gleam in his eye. I can remember Mr. Sanders saying: "Robert Louis, they are going to let us do it, and they cleared me as being qualified to supervise you in the evenings until your experiments are completed."

In my senior year, I won an award for my work that was entered into a writing competition. The title of my submission was "The Day America Slept." My report was a personal documentation of interviews I conducted of the black people in my neighborhood, getting their reaction on November 23, 1963, the day President Kennedy was assassinated. I was honored by the North Carolina State Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. I received my award at a dinner at the YMCA on Hillsborough Street in Raleigh. The award was John Kennedy's book entitled Profiles in Courage, which is still a part of my library today.

Since my parents were not rich, I did not go to them for spending money, which meant that I had to work. My first job came in 1960 when I was in the seventh grade. I was the shoeshine boy in the evening in the town's white barbershop located in Forest Hills Shopping Center. I would get off the bus near the railroad track up on Main Street, walk the three or four miles home, then walk the three or so miles to the my job in Forest Hills.

After two weeks, the owner called me in to inform me that his customers were complaining about black shoe polish on their white socks. I promised to be more careful when I applied the polish to their shoes. Shortly after the first meeting, I was summoned again for the same problem. This time I was fired and asked not to return to the barbershop. I looked for other odd jobs to do after school, but with no success. Finally, a white woman who worked in Garner's library hired me to cut grass, weed flower gardens, and perform other chores for her each Saturday morning. The house is located across the railroad track where Rand Road dead-ends at Old Garner Road.

I was always good at finding work in rare establishments in the segregated south. For instance, in the ninth grade I became the night janitor responsible for scrubbing the floor and taking out the trash in Mr. Lloyd's Drugstore on Main Street where blacks could not sit at the eating counter.

All during this time, I continued working during the summer as a field hand in Mr. Hudson's tobacco fields located down and around Highway 50 going toward Benson. It was hot priming tobacco in the fields and I always told myself as I worked in the heat of the day "that a better day for me was just around the corner."

At 9 years old, I helped daddy build our house that sits at 221 1/2 Haywood Street. Here is a man with only a third-grade education who built the very house I grew up in. The family still lives in the house to this very day. He built it from the ground up. He dug the foundation with a shovel and laid every cinderblock and hammered every nail on the inside. While building the house took eight years to complete and was a great accomplishment, to me the greatest thing my father did was to do the complete electrical wiring of this house once he built it.

As a young child, I saw my father take a light bulb, two pieces of electrical wire and a battery, and work with this unit until he taught himself how electricity flowed. Once he got it to work, he looked at me and smiled and said, "I know how to make it work now."

Once he figured out how to make the light come on, I can see him now, in the wee hours of the morning, faced with the new challenge of trying to understand how to place a switch in the system to turn the lights on and off. I remember the joy that came over my father's face and flowed over into me, when he figured-out how to include the switch into the system.

Armed with his self-taught education in electricity, my father wired our entire house. I was by his side when the town electrical inspector came to inspect the wiring. So that you can appreciate this, let me set the era: (1) A black man; (2) 1957; (3) Small southern town in North Carolina. You get the picture.

This white inspector walked throughout each room of the house. He climbed into the attic space and stayed up there for quite sometime. Daddy said he hoped nothing had happened to him up there. He finally came down and went outside and crawled under the house. During all this time, the man said nothing to my father. When he came from under the house, he went to the junction box outside and inspected all of the wires my father had connected into the box.

The man finally spoke to my father.

"Who did the electrical work on this house?" My father answered: "I did."

"Do you have an electrician's license?" My father answered: "No, I do not."

"Then who did this work?" My father repeated the same answer: "I did."

"Who helped you with the electrical work?" My father answered: "A man from work showed me how to connect the wires, and I took it from there."

Without saying another word, the man got in his truck and left. To our surprise, the man returned in about 30 minutes. This time he had a second white man with him. The second man did not inspect the house, but asked the same type questions the first one had asked. My father's answers were the same. The second man identified himself as the town of Garner supervisor of electrical inspectors.

He told my father that they could not find anything wrong with his wiring, but could not understand how he did it without a license. He then told my father that they were going to pass this electrical job, but for him not to do this kind of work again in Garner without a license. My father acknowledged that he would not. My father thanked the men, and they left. After they were out of sight, my father said to me: "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard, asking me not to do this again. They don't know, but I never intend to build another house and won't need to do it again." I laughed, but recognized that I was in the presence of a really smart man.

I grew into a pretty good basketball player for Garner Consolidated High School. When I entered my freshman year, I made the starting-lineup and was a starter in every game from 1962 to 1965. I was team captain my senior year (1965). I became an All-County, All-Region, and All-Star basketball player. During our school awards ceremonies held in the gym, I was always proud when my name was called to receive the trophy for the "Basketball Player with the Highest Scholastic Average." This honor was received my entire high school years.

When I entered Saint Augustine's College on an academic scholarship, I tried out for and made the basketball team my freshman year. I traveled with the team and started in several games, but was having difficulty keeping my mathematics and chemistry (my major) grades up. I continued playing on the team in the early part of my sophomore year, but quit the team after playing for a brief moment against Earl "the Pearl" Monroe in the Greensboro Coliseum in the fall of 1966. Following the game against Winston Salem Teacher's College (now Winston Salem State University), I returned to campus and turned in my basketball uniform. I never played basketball again until I played on the playgrounds in Washington, D.C., while in graduate school at Howard University. And this is important. When I turned in my uniform, I had already lost my academic scholarship. I had to get my academic focus back on track. By the way, as I recall, Earl "The Pearl" hit 62 points that night.

I came to Christ at the age of 12. It was during August revival at our church in the summer of 1960. The Monday following my baptism, one of the elderly men in the neighborhood who always stood by watching us play baseball during the summer, called me over and said: "Robert Louis, today while you were playing I saw a difference in you now that you have joined the church."

I continued my education by obtaining a bachelor's of science degree in chemistry from Saint Augustine's College in Raleigh in 1969, a

master's of science and Ph.D. in physical organic chemistry from Howard University, Washington, D.C., in 1971 and 1973 respectively.

Today, I am the founding executive director of the Science and Engineering Alliance, Inc. (SEA). As CEO, I am leading the SEA in its mission to foster research collaboration among an alliance of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and to create public and private partnerships as a basis for improving these academic institutions' research infrastructure.

I spent my career in the laboratory at the Celanese Corporation in Charlotte, the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory (NRL) in Washington, D.C., and in technical management in the Office of Research at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) in Rockville, Md.

My technical work internal and external to the NRC led to international assignments to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland (1980), the Joint Research Center in Ispra, Italy (1980), Karlsruhe Nuclear Facility in the F.R. of Germany (1981), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, Austria (1981), and many countries in West Africa (1982-1987).

I was selected a member of the New York Academy of Sciences; am a member of the National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCChE); Howard University Science, Engineering and Mathematics Program (HUSEM) Advisory Board; and one of the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Advisory Boards. During my career, I have contributed to more than 30 scientific and professional publications.

While working at the NRC (1975-1990), I received several awards for high-quality performance. I have received distinguished alumni awards from my undergraduate institution, Saint Augustine's College, and my high school alumni association, Garner "C" Alumni Association. In 1998, I was honored by Howard University as their "Most Distinguished Alumni in Chemistry with Leadership Potential for the 21st Century."

In addition, I have been a Visiting Research Scientist at Howard University, a NASA Fellow, a Howard University Terminal Fellow, and a guest speaker in the Applied Sciences' Executive Master of Technology Management Program at Wharton's School of Business and School of Engineering. In 1998, the City Council of Jackson, Mississippi honored me with their trailblazer award. In 2000, I was appointed a member of a Blue Ribbon Commission, consisting of corporate leaders, politicians, and scholars, who will devise a five-year tactical plan and a 10-year strategic vision for Jackson State University, an HBCU located in Jackson, Miss. In 2001, I was invited to the White House twice to take part in President Bush's briefings on his "No Child Left Behind" educational initiative.

My home now is Silver Spring, Md., where I reside with my wife Alzonja, who is formerly from Zebulon. We are in our 33rd year of marriage, and have three grown children and two grandchildren.

While daddy is still with us today, mama is not. She passed away on April 20, 2001. During the funeral service at Wake Baptist Church, I became overwhelmed when a resolution was read indicating that my organization, the SEA, had moved to establish the Verna Mae Shepard Scholarship Fund (VMSSF) in honor of the work I do for the education of young people all over the nation. I had no part in this, and was shocked when the statement was read. When I returned to my office in Washington, D.C., I learned that the SEA Board Chairman initiated the VMSSF.

The Shepard family looks forward to making the first VMSSF Award at Wake Baptist Church at the close of the 2002 academic year.

I miss mama so much, but her teachings will remain with me forever. The things she stood for and pushed for were not the norm for the black children growing up in a small town like Garner. She introduced each of the children to music (I owned and played alto sax in the Garner Consolidated High School Band). She would scrape and sometimes borrow money so we could participate in all the field trips. Because of her accomplishments in the time in which she lived, she will always be a great inspiration to me.

My days were happy days growing up in Garner. I still consider Garner a great place, and I return as often as possible. My philosophy toward my work and my life was established in Garner, which is to stay the course because "better is the end than the beginning." Therefore, I believe that one should keep persevering toward the prize, but always take the high road in the process.

*You can learn more about the SEA by visiting the web site at: <http://www.llnl.gov/sea>*