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Carmaleit Oakes
... keeps herself busy.

Senior citizen who deserves more than just cursory glance

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At first glance Carmaleit Oakes might appear to be a quiet grandmotherly type content to let complexities of a hectic world rush by.

Look again. Inside Oakes' tiny cottage are the signs of a busy person. There are books, newspapers, piles of clippings and art and mementos from recent trips to Africa.

The warm, comfortable room also holds things dear to her — a framed photo of her mother taken half a century ago.

Oakes is not one to use getting older as an excuse for being uninvolved, although she admits to "pushing 80."

The woman whose name has become a household word in East Palo Alto has been pushing more than age.

She is the outspoken advocate of a number of controversial issues that have won her admirers and detractors. And during recent political candidate forums no one was surprised to see Oakes in the audience.

Conversation begins quietly and cordially with her. She fusses about her guest's comfort and apologizes for the smallness of her surroundings.

But the docile exterior soon falls

away and reveals a tiny woman with a large fire inside.

The tiny hand that had smoothed the crocheted doily on the guest's chair pounds the table for emphasis when she broaches the topics of race, pride, cityhood, today's youth and education.

Oakes taught school all her life. She began and ended that career in St. Louis. It was a segregated system where she said the teacher had an almost heroic kind of dedication.

"Integration is beautiful," she said, "but I will say this, in a segregated situation you didn't have much choice but to work extra hard to squeeze something out for your children."

It was a system that delivered to black students the outdated, discarded, tattered books from white schools. Oakes said teachers felt extraordinarily challenged.

"When integration did come, I was amazed at all the material that white people had, especially in the audio-visual area. Material that you just ordered and there it was."

Children were more respectful then, she believes. Perhaps it helped that the black community was so interwoven and intertwined.

"They knew they'd better behave," she said, chuckling. "As a teacher you might live next door to your students. Teacher might come over for dinner. And the children knew you might walk by Mom on the street and Mom might ask a question or two.

"During those days too, the family was the model and the law," she said. "My mother didn't have to set me on her lap and say she loved me all the time. When she got up early in the morning and fixed me hot oatmeal, I knew she loved me."

She emphasized the point with her tiny clenched hand pounding the table again. Thousands of schoolchildren had seen that hand teach the loops and flourishes of penmanship.

And so what happened in Sacramento where Oakes was visiting the Capitol several months ago perhaps should not have amazed her.

At a workshop sponsored by the Black American Political Action Committee, Oakes did not notice Rosalind Dobson Carter staring at her.

"I kept seeing this little woman," Carter recalled by telephone from Sacramento where she is Assemblywoman Maxine Water's secretary. "She is very freckled and that seemed familiar. But for some reason I focused on her hands. Those hands kept bothering me and I kept looking at them. Finally I said, 'Oh my God, is that who I think it is?'"

Oakes had taught Carter in kindergarten in St. Louis. She remembered her student.

Oakes gets good grades from Carter, who recalled a teacher with a stern manner but gentle voice. She described a teacher who would take the time to tie a loose sash; a teacher who understood her distress when she cried because, contrary to her mother's strict orders, her socks had gotten dirty.

"She was one of those teachers who would push you and spur you on to do well. One of those who was just passionate enough, just strict enough, just stern enough and had a lot of good sense."

Carter was actually the second of the California "small world" episodes. Eight years ago, Oakes attended a speech at a senior center. The speaker was Eleanor Curry, public affairs director of radio station KSOL in San Mateo.

Curry was telling a story about how in fourth grade, she had undergone eye surgery and had fallen far behind her class. When she returned, the teacher explained to the class that Eleanor would need extra help, then assigned certain children to help her and stayed herself after school to work with her.

"I related that story and said I would never forget that teacher," Curry recalled. "The minute the speech was over, she came up and said, 'Would you be Eleanor Williams (Curry's maiden name)?"

"She was a good model for us as children and she always insisted that you do your best," said Curry. "If you turned in a paper that did not look right, you were going to sit and do it over. She'd say, 'You don't want your mother to see this.'"

Her son lives in Cupertino. Her daughter, with whom she lived in East Palo Alto, was killed in 1980.

Mouton remembers Oakes' unrelenting fight for East Palo Alto's incorporation as a city.

"She believed that incorporation was an idea whose time had come even when many a stouthearted person among us became discouraged," she said.

"She risked ridicule and threats from people both inside an outside the community who didn't understand that she was doing whatever she could do, not for personal glory, but for the children of the community — those alive now and those yet unborn."

"In two years we have made a city," Oakes said proudly. "We have police and we have our own public works department, but the self image has to start within yourself."

Next, she said, citizens will work on good city ordinances and high neighborhood standards.

"If you can't park your car in Palo Alto on the lawn, you can't park it in East Palo Alto on the lawn either," she said.

Although not as active these days, she is still a member of the city's personnel commission, a volunteer at the Senior Center and a board member of a private, non-profit management consulting agency there called Community Development Institute (CDI).

The former teacher from St. Louis still has the interest of East Palo Alto's young people's education at heart.

A good teacher has to get that certain "rhythm" going between herself and the child, she said. A child can tell how a teacher feels about him.

"Our children have to like themselves," she said. "If they feel like they are not valuable, they have no motivation.

"If they think there is something bad about themselves, they want to crush it," she said.

She paused and her thoughts went back to community activities.

"I'm cooling down," she said. "But I am keeping my eyes and ears on things."

She feels good about her role and especially about the legacy that teachers leave.

"A teacher," she said proudly, "is a person who causes people to think for themselves."