



*A
Celebration of Life
for
Elizabeth Louella
Cowan*

*This we wish for you above all else;
comfot for your pain,
respite from your sorrow,
memory unyoked from regret,
and peace for today and all your days.*



Sunrise
October 27, 1940

Sunset
January 20, 2025

We'd also like to thank:

Sanders Funeral Home
Smithfield, NC

Macz Funeral Home
Centralia, IL.

Reverend Ronald Johnson
New Bethel Baptist Church
Centralia IL.

Traci O'Neal Ellis
Coordinator

Family and Friends

Saturday, February 8, 2025
11:00 am
New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church
501 N Sycamore St
Centralia, IL 62801



Obituary

Elizabeth Louella Blackwell Cowan, who spent 32 years as a Chicago Public School teacher and administrator, where she instilled a love of reading, math, and music to generations of elementary schoolers while modeling the importance of kindness and respect, died in Smithfield, North Carolina January 20, 2025, after a long illness.

Mrs. Cowan, who was born and raised in Centralia, Illinois and known lovingly, far and wide, as “Betty Lou,” maintained she was a country girl at heart and after retirement, moved to Clayton, North Carolina to enjoy its wide open spaces and to be closer to her children and grandchildren.

Her nephew, Melvin Blackwell, who was a few years younger, lived a block away, and was raised as a sibling to Mrs. Cowan, recalls, “She was the sweetheart of Centralia— gorgeous, intelligent, funny, and just a sweetheart! And did she ever love her cats!”

Mrs. Cowan had also been known to close friends and family colloquially, iconically, as “The Great E,” as well-- for plenty of good reason.

At 18-years-old, while staying with relatives during the summer before college, she wandered into the offices of Johnson Publishing Company hoping to find work as a typist. They took one look at her and made her a model on the spot, barely even putting lipstick on her or powdering her nose, she said, before they started taking photos. The first of which became a cover of “Jet” magazine.

“I had on my very best dress, a little beige shirtwaist at that time, and I had my little heels and stockings,” she once recalled. “I was so disheveled, I had perspiration stains under my arms. This guy came down and escorted me upstairs and just had me sit for a few portraits. If you look closely at that picture,” Mrs. Cowan said, “you can probably still see the sweat.”

Later that summer, she graced the cover of Johnson’s “Tan,” magazine but her triumph was marred by repeatedly having to explain, emphatically, that she was not the subject of the cover story “Teen-age Hellcat! Too Wild to be Tamed,” which she would want Centralians to understand once and for all!

In addition to her capacious beauty, Mrs. Cowan was an intellect, who went on to earn a Master’s degree in education, and she was a defender of union rights, cautioning her children to never cross a picket line. In retirement, she busied herself with social organizations and volunteer work including the Democratic Women of Johnston County and the Modernettes Club of Smithfield, and she regularly attended water aerobics classes for years. She was also a longtime member of the Good Samaritan Baptist Church in Garner, NC.

Her abiding passion in retirement was her love of animals, most especially cats. Both her four beloved indoor “fur babies,” and the outdoor feral colony she named and cared for that lived under her porch. In addition she attended the various piano recitals, football and soccer games, and college theater productions of her grandchildren, and enjoyed time with family and visiting the Clayton farmer’s market. She loved watching her “stories” (family knew not to call during “Days of Our Lives”) and political news, but her greatest comfort came in the wordless joys of nature. She cherished the morning solace of her back porch where she could often be found listening to the chirping and buzzing of flying things, with her binoculars at the ready to bird watch and enjoy the patterns of flora and fauna gifted by God.

Her marriage to Lonnie Gerald O’Neal ended in divorce. Her marriage to Ronald Cowan ended in divorce.

When she turned 70, Mrs. Betty Lou Cowan said this:

“I would never trade my amazing friends, my wonderful life, my loving family, for less gray hair or a flatter belly. As I’ve aged, I’ve become kinder to myself. I’ve become my own friend. I don’t chide myself for eating that extra cookie, or for not making my bed or for buying that silly cat toy that I surely didn’t need, that Biddle and Clarkie would love so much. I am entitled to a treat, to be messy, to be extravagant.”

I have seen too many dear friends leave this world too soon: before they understood the great freedom that comes with aging. I am forgetful, but then again, some of life is just as well forgotten. And I eventually remember the important things.

I am so blessed to have lived long enough to have my hair turn gray, and to have my youthful laughs be forever etched into deep grooves on my face. So many have never laughed, and so many have died before their hair could turn silver. As you get older, it’s easier to be positive. You care less about what other people think.

So, to answer your question, I like being older. It has set me free. I like the person I have become. I am not going to live forever, but while I am still here, I will not waste time lamenting what could have been, or worrying about what will be. And I shall eat, drink, and laugh every single day if I feel like it. Because at 70 years old, I have surely earned the right.”

That was even more true for the beloved Betty Lou Blackwell, a daughter of Centralia, Illinois, who died at 84.

She is survived by her loving children, Lisa Allen and husband, Darryl Allen, Lonnae Beth O’Neal and husband, Thomas Reed, and Charles O’Neal and wife, Amber Frame O’Neal. Her legacy lives on in her many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, Brandon Caldwell, and wife Allison Caldwell, and their two children, Camden and Quinn, Ryan Caldwell Vaughn and wife Kaitlyn Vaughn, Darryl Alexander Allen, Sydney Noelle Evelyn Parker, Savannah Nicole Elizabeth Parker, Satchel Nicolaus Ethan Parker, Marshall Andrew Winston Reed, Gabrielle Nicole Reed, Brooke Viola Reed, Myleika Whitelow and her sons, Jeremiah Brinson and Robbie Dabney III, Brittany Anderson and her daughter Brooklyn, Jordan O’Neal, and Christian O’Neal. She also leaves behind a host of nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends who cherished her grace, wisdom and generous spirit throughout the years.

She is predeceased by her beloved parents, Grover and Mabel Blackwell, her older brothers, David Blackwell, the world renowned mathematician whose work provided the basis for Artificial Intelligence, Joseph Blackwell, and Johnson "Skeezix" Blackwell.

Order of Service

Prelude (*soft music*)

Lisa Coleman (pianist)

Musical Selection

Morgan Isaiah (soloist)

“Precious Lord”

Lisa Coleman (pianist)

Scripture Readings

Exodus 14: 13-14

Tracy Holliway-Wiggins

Philippians 4:6-7

Gloria MacDonald

The Lord’s Prayer

Gloria MacDonald

Prayer

Rev. Valijeon Powe

Tributes of Remembrance

Friends & Family

Lonnae O’Neal (daughter)

Musical Selection

Morgan Isaiah (soloist)

“Order My Steps”

Lisa Coleman (pianist)

Acknowledgements

Traci O’Neal Ellis (niece)

Musical Selection

Satchel Parker
(Grandson - pianist)

Eulogy

Rev. Ron Johnson

Recessional (*soft music*)

Lisa Coleman