

A TRIBUTE TO WALTER PLEMMER, JR.

1921 - 2000



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Born in Edgecombe County to musical parents, Walter and Lucy Dunn Plemmer, Walter Plemmer, Jr. (who was later to become Mayor of Princeville) lived his early years on *Rest-a-Bit* farm with his parents and six siblings. Born with hemophilia, Walter Jr. developed crippling hematoid arthritis but managed to get to and from school using his crutches.

At age 10, or thereabouts, young Walter entered the hospital in Gastonia for treatment and when he came back, he was four years behind his classmates. He then lived with his aunt and uncle in Tarboro on Wilson Street and graduated from Patillo High School.

Dr. M.D. Quigless told his parents to make sure young Walter went to college because he would never be able to do physical labor. They saved *25 cents* a week at a local building and loan association for his education. He graduated from Knoxville College in Tennessee with a B.A. degree in music and later earned an M.A. degree from North Carolina Central University.

After a year or two of teaching in Wise, N.C., young Walter returned home and taught music and English in Edgecombe County schools for 36 years (first at Conetoe High and then at North Edgecombe High) before retiring in 1984. He was honored as *Teacher of the Year* at both the county and district levels in 1971.

A member of Cherry Hill Missionary Baptist Church for 60 years, Mr. Plemmer was the musician there for 55 years and a member of the board of deacons for 40 years. It was there that he met teenaged Martha Albritton who was visiting family nearby. They married in 1950 when she was 21 and built their home in Princeville where they raised their only child, their son Andre.

Like his father, Walter Plemmer, Jr. played numerous instruments-guitar, banjo, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, piano and organ. His early musical knowledge came mostly from watching and listening to others play. If he heard a tune once he could play it; if he heard it twice he could master it.

His first formal musical training came during his teenage years when William P. Arnold, husband of lifelong friend Lucille Arnold, gave him piano lessons.

Walter Plemmer later taught piano for more than five decades and mentored students in every area of music. He took four of his most promising voice students (Jimmie Stanley Warren Jones, Ellis Ray Vines and Robert Earl Slade) to New York City to appear on the Vincent Lopes Show at the Taft Hotel. This was an enormously popular show, broadcast by national hook-up every Saturday night. While in New York they performed for the Jimmy Dorsey Band at the

Statler Hotel and provided the entertainment on a tour boat as it circled Manhattan Island while they sang.

While teaching music in the Edgecombe County Public School System during the early 70's, Mr. Plemmer successfully arranged at least three album recordings in which he directed using the local vocal talents of the students from the choruses he had formed at both Conetoe High and North Edgecombe High School(see the enclosed album covers).

In the Spring of 1976, he organized and directed the Tarboro Jubilee Singers for Tarboro's Bi-Centennial Celebration. The group's excellence and acclaim led them to the World's Fair in 1982.

Walter Plemmer was no stranger to adversity, but his optimism, generosity of spirit and his love of music and people often transported him from his physical pain. Unfortunately, his latter years were difficult. An automobile accident in June of 1999 caused cardiac arrest (it took 15 minutes to revive him) and severe internal injuries from which he never fully recovered.

Then, in September of 1999, Hurricane Floyd dealt the family another devastating blow. Flood waters rose to eye level in the Plemmer's lovely brick home which had been expanded and improved over the years. They lost everything, including his piano, organ, all musical instruments and music. It was months later, shortly before his last trip to the hospital, before Walter Plemmer again had a keyboard-a gift from an admirer.

The man who never said "no" to a request to play music if it were possible for him to do it, gave his final performance last May 16th, 2000 at the Nash County Cultural Center with his friends and fellow musicians, Joe Jones and Joe Hines.

A whole new generation of young musicians heard, and were inspired by, him. They stood and cheered the Walter Plemmer Trio, and afterwards rushed to the stage to talk with the masters and have programs autographed.

Today, we pay tribute to a man who glowed from within with the goodness he exhibited throughout his lifetime; to a man who gave unselfishly of himself and shared his talent and his love for music with generations of students and admirers; and to a man whose acceptance of adversity with a positive outlook inspired everyone he encountered.

Today, those who knew him well, those who knew him slightly and those who knew him not-at-all pay tribute to a musician, a teacher, a friend and a thoroughly good man-**WALTER PLEMMER, JR.**

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